

Border Of Life And Death

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Border Of Life And Death

by [babybahamut](#)

Summary

Arriving at an important decision, Yukari realises her time in Gensokyo is coming to an end- but she has some dominoes to set up before that time comes.

Ran

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

More often than not, it was a worthless bunch of rags, but on rare occasions the Bunbunmaru Newspaper was of some merit. Yukari was re-reading the day's issue for the third time, attempting to separate embellishment from fact; 'NEW YOUKAI TEMPLE LANDS IN GENSOKYO' the headline boldly declared, the image alongside it showing a rather flustered monk in front of what appeared to be a temple Yukari hadn't seen before. The headline's use of the word "LANDS" had piqued her curiosity most of all, temples rarely being seen flying about from place to place, but the article explained that matter. It described how Gensokyo's courageous and beloved shrine maiden, Reimu Hakurei, accompanied by two other humans who were unnamed throughout the article, had given chase to a mysterious 'treasure ship' seen flying over the Human Village. She had read the article enough times to know what was coming next, yet Yukari's grip still tightened as she read how the ship had taken them to the depths of Makai; just the name alone was enough to leave a bitter taste in her mouth, and the thought that anything in Gensokyo was still able to enter it after Reimu had sealed the entrance years ago was a worry.

The part of the article she felt needed dissecting most, however, was towards the end. After a fierce battle, so the article reported, Reimu and company unsealed a monk from ancient times- Byakuren Hijiri. She was the one who had set up the temple, and in a hastily-given interview at the article's closing said that she intended its use for both human and youkai visitors equally- in the hope that both could live side by side in harmony.

Byakuren Hijiri. It was a name Yukari recognised, though it took some jogging of her memory before she remembered why. The Byakuren Hijiri of her memory, from many centuries ago, was indeed a monk, but not one allied to humans at all. In her younger days, she had heard tales of a once-human monk who had turned on humankind, and was offering covert assistance to youkai in trouble. In a time before Gensokyo, as humans were gaining greater and greater powers against youkai and beginning to hunt them to extinction, such a being was highly revered among youkai; but one day, she simply disappeared. Forgotten by the humans, and eventually most youkai too, Yukari had sometimes wondered if there was any truth to her tale.

Now, a person fitting the description had appeared, but rather than the anti-human angle she was known for, apparently advocated equality? Yukari was skeptical, especially given she had been found sealed away in Makai of all places; most inhabitants of that world followed the beliefs of its Goddess, and she was not renowned for her kindness to humans.

Also of note for Yukari, and she couldn't help but smile as she realised it, was Reimu's reaction to the whole thing; here apparently was a powerful magician talking of equality between humans and youkai- a belief unthinkable to all before Gensokyo's creation, and even afterwards rarely held by the shrine maidens- but rather than attack and seal her away again, as any of her predecessors would have, Reimu saw fit to release her. It was not the first time Reimu had shown a slight sympathy to the youkai whose world she shared.

"It's her, isn't it," Yukari spoke quietly to herself, lowering the paper. "I can't put it down to fluke any longer." She stood and stretched; daylight was just starting to creep over the mountains, the sky turning an inky blue. On a normal day she would have retired for the morning, but she had just come to an important decision, and it required immediate action.

"Ran." Yukari approached her shikigami companion as she prepared breakfast. "I'm going out,

Ran. Complete your rounds as usual while I'm gone. Although... perhaps don't go to Hakugyokorou, for a few days at least.”

Ran stifled a groan. The last time Yukari had meddled at Hakugyokorou, she was the one who had taken the blame- and the beating- from the shrine maiden. Knowing it was a futile exercise to bring that up again, she instead challenged Yukari's intent. “It's nearly daylight, though. Are you sure?” “I'm afraid it can't wait,” Yukari explained with slight impatience. “I have made a decision, you see- or rather, the decision was made for me, years ago, but I have just decided to acknowledge it.” Ran was curious, but Yukari had already begun her exit, and besides which she didn't want to be accused of slacking. At least staying away from the Netherworld for a few days would give her extra time for her many other chores.

“One last thing, Ran,” Yukari called over her shoulder as she prepared to leave. “At some point today I will be in extreme danger. You are not to come, under any circumstances, to my aid- even if the connection between us breaks. Do you understand?”

Ran raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Yukari finding herself in extreme danger was a routine enough occurrence that Ran doubted she would have responded anyway; in a way, it was nice to be given advance warning this time.

Taking Ran's silence as tacit acceptance, Yukari stepped outside, and allowed herself a moment to consider her first task. She needed to speak to Byakuren first; her sudden arrival could spell trouble later on, and regardless she wanted to know exactly what had happened in Makai that day.

She took flight, not wanting to use the power of the Gap for fear of startling her quarry, and with an urgent pace made her way towards the Human Village. Ran never saw her master again.

Chapter End Notes

I've wanted to write this story for a long time now and since I've made a pledge to get 75,000 words written by the end of the year, now is the perfect time to do it. It's chapter 1 of I think seven of what I'd call my love letter to the series- I haven't loved a series as much as this one before or since discovering it, and although I doubt my affection for Touhou will ever go away completely it's not been as strong recently as it once was. I wanted to get this story out before I lose interest too much and don't care enough any more.

Yukari's always been my favourite character from the very start so naturally my ideas tended to revolve around her :D It's set immediately after the events of Touhou 12, perhaps within the first week or so of Byakuren settling into the Human Village. UFO is probably my favourite game of the series and Byakuren ties for favourite character, so... I openly admit my fanboy is showing a lot. :P

Touhou's kind of a loose canon and is open to a lot of interpretation, I find, so if something here disagrees with the way you envision Gensokyo life please consider it an alternate universe telling :)

Myourenji

Chapter Summary

Yukari investigates Gensokyo's newest arrival.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Well, isn't this unusual?”

Yukari regarded the small human with curiosity as it cowered back against the rocky wall: the cave was shallow enough that the light of day was enough to see by. “I chose this place because I thought no human ever came here, after all.”

“Get... get away from me!” the child shouted, its voice quivering with fear. The human seemed to be female; Yukari was no expert on human biology, but it appeared to still be in its larval stage- no, not larval; childhood they called it- and hadn't yet begun transforming into an adult.

“How interesting... You say 'get away from me' as though I am the trespasser,” she chided playfully. In truth, she had little claim over the cavern; it was neatly tucked away in the mountains near a human village and provided her a good vantage point to watch their comings and goings, and was far enough away from the shrine that she could avoid any trouble. Humans rarely came this way, and the craggy mountain edges covered her well enough that any sightings of her were only brief, forgotten to other distractions or written off as mountain wildlife. Local legends of “the witch in the mountains” helped keep the cave undisturbed, and it gave her no small amount of satisfaction to be the likely origin of these horror stories.

Yukari took a step closer to the child, but stopped as she dropped to the ground with a wail and covered her eyes. “D-don't come any closer!”

Yukari smiled, slightly. Most humans displaying such bravado would at least try to look intimidating. “It's almost as though you fear yourself more than you fear me. Well then, little human, what will you do if I don't leave?”

“I might-! You might- get hurt!”

Yukari froze for a second, and then relaxed; she could sense something unusual about this child- some strange energy within her, a kind of magic that humans rarely exhibited- but it wasn't like the power the shrine maidens held; their magic was designed to hunt and destroy youkai, while this child's power felt more akin to her own- supernatural in origin, more like a youkai's black magic. She decided the child posed no threat, and called her bluff. “I doubt you would be able to- oh!”

For a fraction of a second- just a flash- Yukari felt a sudden erratic burst of energy come from the child. It struck her but passed harmlessly, like she had been caught by a spiritual gust of wind.

“What was that?” she hissed, ready to strike back if she was in danger. “What power did you just use on me?”

The child shot a sudden, fearful glance at her, eyes wide and shining with tears. “It- it didn't hurt you?”

“I didn't ask that.” She stepped closer, shoulders squared, reading what she could of the girl's boundaries- normal, no different from any other human, except this one magic she couldn't place.

“I- I don't know what it is! I can't control it!”

Yukari's eyes narrowed. “Have you done it before? To other humans?” The child nodded quickly in answer to both questions, withdrawing ever further into herself. “What happens to them?”

The girl huddled into herself, her answer barely audible. "They fall down..."

Yukari stared at the child, her anger turning to surprise. The power of death; of course it hadn't affected her. But the child had killed, at least once, and Yukari was now darkly aware of a different threat to both of them; she strode to the open cavern mouth and scanned the edges of the mountain for any vengeful humans or shrine maidens who might be looking to exorcise her supernatural ability. She took a steadying breath as she saw the mountainside was empty; the human village appeared to be functioning as normal too, the people there apparently having not yet realised one of their number was missing. Her attitude calmed, she came back to the frightened girl. "I wonder, then," she began, her usual demeanour finally returned, "whether you are here to protect the others, or yourself." The girl didn't respond, but Yukari hadn't expected her to. "In either case, you needn't worry about me. A trick like yours would only hurt humans, after all."

The implication behind her words seemed to confirm some new fear in the child, and she instinctively drew back in fright. "My my, are you really one to judge?" Yukari said derisively as the child trembled. "You've been responsible for more human death than I have, I'll have you know." This didn't seem to help her case at all; she chastised herself for forgetting how readily humans over-estimated the amount of danger they were in, and tried a different method of reassurance. "I can't speak for others," she began, "but despite what your kind believes, I'm happy to leave humans be... though I will protect myself if I must," she said with a dark glance at the child. "More importantly, in your case," she said, her thoughts already elsewhere, "have you thought about how you're going to survive here?"

The child looked at her blankly, a clear no. Yukari sighed, and with a swish of a hand, opened a horizontal Gap in front of her. A spurt of water gushed out, and with it, up popped a fish. She deftly caught it and in the same motion closed the Gap before the whole river emptied into the cave. "Humans... eat fish, yes? I've seen them with their nets, and I don't think fish are useful for anything else." She threw the wriggling fish down in front of the girl, her eyes wide with a mixture of horror and amazement.

"I will offer you a deal," Yukari continued as the fish bounced around. "The shrine maidens are as dangerous to you now as you are to them, and they will treat you like they would any youkai. As long as you promise not to tell anyone about me, you may stay here in safety with me. Agreed?" The girl nodded quietly, relaxing only slightly as she began to trust Yukari.

"Ah, thank goodness we've sorted that out." She sighed with relief, the formality of the contract vanishing as she leaned casually against the cavern wall. "Well then, a drink to celebrate-" a bottle fell neatly from a Gap into her waiting hand- "and, assuming you have one, would you tell me your name?"

"Yuyuko..." she whispered, looking warily between the bottle and the forgotten fish.

"Yuyuko," she repeated, holding the open bottle out to her. "And I'm Yukari. Pleased to meet you."

Chapter 2- Myourenji

Yukari watched the temple from afar, hidden in a house she knew to be empty. It didn't seem the humans from the village were quite ready yet to give the temple a chance; a few curious bystanders whispered to each other in suspicious tones, taking glances at the temple and quickly averting their gaze, while harried parents ushered their openly and loudly curious children past it, and those brave enough to get a closer look quickly reconsidered any time a resident youkai emerged from within.

These youkai were an assorted bunch- a mouse, a nyuudo and his handler, and a karakasa Yukari recognised as the one who had interrupted her journey here; on occasion the ghostly former captain of what was once a ship could be seen floating about hard at work, and some sort of shapeshifter seemed to be having difficulty staying out of mischief, struggling to contain herself with so many humans nearby to scare.

The main draw, of course, was the monk; she made regular appearances outside the temple, both to welcome the few newcomers who dared to approach, and to make requests of the youkai who were already there. She seemed gentle, and well-respected by the youkai, each request met with an emphatic nod and immediate jump to action. The temple itself was bare-bones as expected, and the youkai were working hard to convert it down from a ship. Outwardly, at least, there was no cause for suspicion.

The morning sun was in full force now, and as several of the youkai had retired for the day Yukari felt the time was right to make her approach. Byakuren would likely talk more openly without her friends close by, and Yukari's presence would deter any would-be human visitors. She strode through the village, parasol open against the harsh sunlight, paying no heed to the humans as they scattered out of her way- either recognising her by sight or immediately able to identify her as a youkai; she had long ago stopped fearing what they might do to her for being so bold.

The monk noticed Yukari's approach, and politely dismissed the tiger-striped youkai she had been speaking with to go out and meet her. "An unusual time of day to see you," she spoke, bowing slightly in modest greeting, "but nonetheless, welcome to Myouren Temple!"

Yukari met her gaze, and drank in every detail, physical and magical, about Byakuren Hijiri, the hero and villain of the stories she had heard long ago. They rang true, from her unusual hair to her bold presence and voice; commanding, powerful, and full of conviction, but fair, genuine, and kind; the kind of person who could lead an army of ten thousand without dissent and yet be considered a friend by every member. Yukari had no trouble seeing why the humans under her watch had revered her.

Yukari looked around nonchalantly, deliberately avoiding eye-contact with the monk when she spoke. "This is a temple for youkai?" she asked.

"A temple for all comers, both human and youkai," Byakuren explained without any hint of impatience. "Although," she added, raising a hand to her chin and frowning slightly, "as you probably noticed while you were watching us, we haven't really had much luck enticing the humans to visit us yet."

Yukari's eyes flicked towards her. It hadn't been said with any kind of malice, or even smugness, but it troubled her nonetheless. "Dear me... I thought I was better at hiding than that," she said.

Byakuren smiled. "One of our youkai residents is a mouse, very good at scouting; she has asked her friends to tell me if they see anyone approaching so I can be ready to greet them."

"Ah! I wonder if she would make a good play mate for Chen. Our cat," she added to answer Byakuren's quizzical expression, not necessarily intending it as a threat, but nonetheless unable to resist playing a game of one-upmanship.

"Oh, cats are sweet," Byakuren answered serenely, apparently taking no notice of the implication. "But I think Shou might get a little jealous if Nazrin made another feline friend. Our tiger," she finished.

"Hm, that wouldn't do... Perhaps they would all behave themselves under the eye of Reimu. My shrine maiden." She didn't mention Ran, feeling a fox wasn't really a match for a tiger.

Byakuren laughed, and raised her hands in defeat.. "I hope so! Reimu has already schooled me once, I wouldn't want them to give her a reason to do so again."

She had opened this opportunity quite by accident, but Yukari seized the chance to question the monk while it was available. "You battled her in Makai, and yet she let you go... I bet there's quite a story behind that."

"A simple misunderstanding," Byakuren said confidently, taking Yukari by surprise with her readiness- as though she was waiting to be asked this. "The world was a very different place before I was sealed away- Youkai were being destroyed from all sides, barely able to fight back. Fighting for equality as I do naturally meant battling against the stronger side."

"And the first thing you see upon release is a flustered shrine maiden flying at you! No wonder you were defensive."

Byakuren nodded. "I understand now why she took my words the wrong way; things are the other way around in Gensokyo. But she spoke boldly of her job exorcising youkai, and I took it as a sign nothing had changed. I had no idea such a paradise existed. A world just for youkai!" Her face lit up, unable to quite conceal her excitement. "I would never have dared dream of such a place before I was sealed away, but humans and youkai really do live side by side here, don't they?"

It was a subtle hint, but it was exactly what Yukari had been listening out for; Byakuren spoke of striving for balance, but it was her choice of words that betrayed a bias towards youkai that Yukari thought troubling. She recalled the stories; they told of more than just a subtle bias. She pressed on, intent on revealing the monk's true intentions while she had the advantage. "You weren't always so concerned for the humans though, were you?" she said, her eyes glinting as she dealt the blow. "Or did *they* benefit from that shipwreck, too?" Byakuren's smile dropped, and Yukari stuck the dagger in as far as it would go. "Yes, I know the stories, Byakuren Hijiri. All youkai of our time know the stories. The fallen monk, the youkai hero, who secretly turned on her friends to aid us from behind the scenes."

Byakuren's arm raised against her chest defensively, and she lowered her head. "...I don't know exactly what stories were told about me," she began quietly, but still calm, "but I won't deny my actions were certainly to the benefit of one party over the other. The humans sealed me away for a reason, after all." she seemed to regain her stride, and took Yukari's gaze once more. "But a thousand years in solitude gives one lots of time to reflect," she said with another grim smile. "A thousand years in *Makai*," Yukari spoke back, her eyes narrowing; her usual lackadaisiness was gone from her voice, every word now pointed and venomous. "And like everything else marred by that toxic world, you stink."

Byakuren had come to expect such childish insults from that one annoying ice fairy who kept flying in and out of the temple, but from Yukari it was a shock; the rug pulled from under her feet, she could only stammer a response. "I... pardon me?"

"You, your story, and every word you speak, they all stink of *her*."

That had done it; Byakuren inhaled sharply, her eyes widened in shock and she covered her mouth with her hands. The monk stepped closer; now it was her turn to avoid eye contact. She lowered her tone, additionally muffled by her hands, but she couldn't disguise the minor tremble now in her voice, distinct from her usual confident way of speaking. "How much do you know?"

Yukari smiled, triumphant; the cat had caught the mouse, and far quicker than she had anticipated.

Now it was time to sow the seeds for the rest of her plan. "I know she's an enemy to my Gensokyo," she began; her whimsy was returning now she had cracked the shell, though every word remained serrated. "And if you're in her pocket, you're an enemy too."

"No," Byakuren answered hotly. "I have no association with her."

She denied it like an insult; good to hear, but easily faked, and Yukari wouldn't be convinced so easily. "Born human, but now a youkai... that was her doing. Your boundaries... her stench is unmistakable."

"Please..." Byakuren began, her voice strained as she considered her position. "You aren't mistaken, I see no point trying to tell you otherwise, but there is much more to the story than that. Might we move somewhere less public? It's not something I want to bleat from the rooftops."

"Ahh, but this spring breeze is so pleasant... it'd be terrible to waste it indoors," was Yukari's answer, as good as a no; the journey would allow Byakuren too much time to think of a story, and there could be any number of youkai within who would provide the monk cover enough to escape- and the opportunity would be lost with her.

"...Very well," Byakuren said, dropping the notion surprisingly quickly by Yukari's reckoning; it seemed she didn't have any intention of trying to escape. Byakuren took a steadying breath and considered her words for a second. "Yes, that power was hers. But if you know her well enough to tell, you know the kind of person she is. I was tricked into- no, not tricked... I won't shrug off the blame entirely." Although Yukari knew Byakuren couldn't deny it, she hadn't been expecting quite such frank honesty; it was disarming, but she let Byakuren continue her story. "I was... *manipulated* into taking her power. A human at death's door, fearing her own mortality, and she came to me promising eternity... I had already made my own unsuccessful attempts beforehand- I would have listened to anyone offering me an answer."

"Why, how sweet of her," Yukari said, "to give you such a gift without asking anything in return." "It wasn't without cost," Byakuren answered, picking up on the implication. "I would have agreed to anything, so I gave no thought to how she would have me repay the debt. The spell made me reliant on stealing the power of other youkai- oh, don't worry," she said with a smile as Yukari recoiled slightly, "I have that part of the spell under control. But at the time, my survival relied on gaining the trust of any youkai I could. Any spare power would be siphoned off to her, and with my position of trust among humans I was to turn any lost souls I could to her."

"My my, so the stories were true after all," Yukari said calmly, showing nothing of her mile-a-minute thought process. "I suppose I owe Suika a drink. Although, that bet was placed on the stories of a youkai *hero*, not *villain*, so..."

Byakuren nodded solemnly. "I certainly wasn't a hero. I did many terrible things- the temple behind me is the result of one of them," she gestured behind her, hoping to have chance to recount Murasa's story another time, "but as time went by something changed. I had always thought of youkai as the enemy- something to be destroyed; but I came to realise youkai and humans were not much different. Youkai were hunted because they disrupted human lives, but equally, humans disrupted youkai lives. With human settlements expanding constantly and the growing threat of the shrine maiden-"

"And the monks," Yukari added coolly.

"And we monks, indeed. Whichever side I fought for was to the destruction of the other. So I began to envision a world we could share, harmoniously."

"Ahh... but humans are selfish creatures, always wanting more to themselves. They won't even share food- sharing the world?"

"My idea wasn't well received, no," she said, laughing mirthlessly. "When my actions were discovered they turned on me. I tried to tell them of my vision, but they only saw me as a traitor- which I was," she said quickly, interrupting Yukari who was about to say the same thing. "I told the youkai I had come to care for to flee, handed myself over to the shrine maidens to aid their escape, and a thousand years later..." she spread her arms demonstratively, her story complete.

Yukari's mind raced, piecing together this new story and sifting through for any obvious untruths; humans were usually terrible liars, but Byakuren had been open and honest and convincing. This was only the first half of her test, however, and served little purpose other than to confirm what Yukari had suspected. The meat of the pudding would not be found in history, but in events to come, and having tilled the soil of Byakuren's past, it was now time to sow some seeds. "If she came calling once more then," she asked as a lead-in, "you would renounce her?"

"Yes, of course," Byakuren answered, with a slight hint of curiosity which she then expanded on.

“But you ask as though that's something likely to happen. Reimu didn't mention her at all- is she really so present a threat?”

“Actually, they did battle once. But... you know how humans are. They blink an eye and they've forgotten already,” Yukari replied. “I suppose Reimu considers the matter dealt with. As for why she's such a threat...”

She sighed, allowing herself a second to think how best to explain her position. It was entirely possible Byakuren was still an enemy, despite any protest to the opposite, and this attempt to appeal to her would fall on deaf ears. However, any attempt to win her over was worth a try, even if the most it achieved was a moment of self-doubt; if it struck in the heat of battle, that second of hesitation could cost her the fight. “You say your power is that of other youkai,” she began, and her eyes narrowed with suspicion as she said it, as though afraid Byakuren might suddenly devour her entirely. “But you know that isn't the case for the rest of us. Tell me,” she asked, “how many other humans did you see in Makai?”

“Oh, well, none, but-”

“Even if you had been free to go where you like,” Yukari interrupted, knowing Byakuren would protest ignorance, “the only humans you would see there are those uninvited and looking for power.”

“But that makes sense- Makai *is* a world for youkai. Isn't Gensokyo the same?”

“Gensokyo is a world where youkai can thrive,” Yukari answered, unable to keep the hurt from her voice, though the question has been asked innocently enough. “Makai is a world only for the whims of its creator. A creator bitter about how the outside world treats us, who would eradicate every human if she had the power to do so. The shortsighted idiot,” she said, a sudden venomous tone coming to her voice. “Without humans to believe in, worship, fear, trust, thank, and blame us, we are nothing. A world for youkai *is* a world for humans...”

“...But she's persuasive enough that other youkai might forget that. Yes, I understand, now.” She nodded, her brow furrowed deeply in thought. “What Reimu said, then... I can see her position more clearly now. Wayward youkai put the humans in danger which then puts other youkai in danger, right? But my own position is not changed,” she said, looking Yukari squarely in the eye. “No matter who is the more dominant power, I will still fight for youkai and humans to be regarded equally. I would like to be on good terms with Reimu, but I will oppose her decisions if I find them unfair.” Her words were resolute, but without any force; spoken only as a statement of fact and not a demonstration of bravado or delinquency.

“What do you know of spellcards?”

“Oh.” The abrupt change of subject caught Byakuren off-guard, having presumably been preparing for some measure of backlash from her declaration of intent. “Well, Reimu told me the basics, and my friends have shown me some of their tricks. I had chance to practice some spells of my own in Makai, though.”

“In Makai? ...The spellcard rules affect Makai too?” Byakuren nodded to the affirmative, and Yukari gasped; the first genuine surprise of the day, and a happy one, she couldn't help but cackle as she mulled this news over. “Ahaha, of course, thinking it through it makes absolute sense, but...” she laughed again, her mood immeasurably lightened as she applied this turn of events to her existing plan of action. “I wonder... Reimu, you dirty little sneak, did you *know* this would happen?”

Byakuren, who had been watching with confused amusement, started on this. “Reimu was involved?”

“Oh, she's too modest, which is why she didn't tell you,” Yukari said, almost sounding like a proud parent, “but the spellcard rules were entirely her idea.”

It was Byakuren's turn for a genuine surprise. “But the rules would only serve to weaken her position, surely? Why would she even agree to be bound by them, much less devise them herself?”

“Ah, why indeed,” Yukari answered wistfully. “Why would the shrine maiden, gifted power that allowed her to charge into the world of demons and defeat its ruler without a worry, place a limit on herself? Why would the one expected to defeat youkai think of a way to do so without destroying them? Why would the shrine maiden, champion of Gensokyo, come up with a system where even the lowest youkai might challenge her and win?” She gave the monk a knowing smile as comprehension dawned on her face. “It’s a shame I’ve had to spell it out so plainly, you know. Watching you both come repeatedly to blows, fighting for exactly the same thing from opposing sides, would have been a lot of fun. Ahh, but time is short, and I am here for a reason, after all.”

Dramatically, she stepped forwards, and lowered her voice. “I’ve told no one else of this, but I’ve decided to trust you,” she lied.

“Thank you?” Byakuren responded, curiosity again tugging at the end of her voice.

“Reimu- and all of Gensokyo, really- must prepare for an invasion. Soon.” Another untruth; Shinki was a warlord by nature, and another attempt at invasion was inevitable, but Yukari spoke with an urgency she couldn’t guarantee... yet. Stoking that particular fire came later.

Byakuren inhaled sharply, and tilted her head back. “So that’s why you’re here,” she said grimly.

“I’m sorry to waste your journey, but I’m afraid you already know more than I do. The only company I had in Hokkai were the shadows; I wasn’t privy to anything outside.”

“No no, I assumed as much, or you would have told Reimu straight away, wouldn’t you?” she said, a snake-like grin with it, unable to resist another bite.

“Yes, I would... but I’m wondering why you haven’t.”

Yukari’s grin deepened, a worthy opponent like this being a rare gift; even so cornered, Byakuren was unshakeable. “Reimu is... well, she’s human, so completely unreasonable. Her “shoot them down first and invite them to tea afterwards” methods don’t really endear her to youkai, even if we understand how important her role is. If she was forewarned of an attack, she’d probably lead the battle alone again. It wouldn’t take much to turn Gensokyo against her... unless she had a powerful ally with a lot of youkai influence.”

“You want me to unite the people behind her banner nearer the time, then?” Byakuren asked pointedly.

“Ahh, you catch on too quickly... It’s so much more fun to lead Reimu along.”

“This is all sounding familiar, that’s all,” she smiled, cheerless. “But at least you’re asking me to do it for a greater cause than my own. If I start gathering youkai in secret, though, Reimu will only turn on us again.”

“Oh, she’ll never *trust* you. But she could hardly hold it against you if you resolved a few incidents, could she?”

Byakuren’s hand went to her chin in thought for a second, followed by a click of her fingers. “That’s perfect!” She announced. “The humans would see we don’t mean to cause trouble, and I could direct the youkai I defeat here too- yes! That suits both of our needs, thank you!”

“I feel like I owe you, so I’ll give you a headstart. Something will be happening in Hakugyokorou soon,” Yukari offered.

“Not-” Byakuren began in alarm, but Yukari cut her off,

“No, no, not her. *This* mischief will be my own, and my last. Consider it a welcoming gift.”

Byakuren opened her mouth to protest any misdeed being performed in her honour, but caught herself as another part of Yukari’s words stood out. “Do you mean to say you’re going to start a life of innocence?” she said wryly.

“Goodness no! The boredom would kill me. Simply put, by the end of today I will have done everything I need to do; it’s the end of my time here.” She said it with no sadness or gravitas, but Byakuren, born human, frowned. Whatever misgivings she might have had for Yukari’s fatalism she kept silent, however.

“That explains a lot,” she said instead. “It seemed like you were passing the baton. Will the Border

survive without your supervision?”

“...You're a sly one.” Yukari's eyes narrowed; she was oblivious to the hypocrisy. “I never told you who I was. Have you known this whole time?”

Byakuren nodded, unashamed of the apparent deception. “I thought I should wait for you to introduce yourself, but considering you're short of time- yes, I know who you are. Reimu told me to expect you. She told me all about you, actually, with some help from Marisa. “

Yukari considered this for a second, then smiled, warmly for the first time. She was unsure whether or not Byakuren could be trusted, being so clearly blessed with no small amount of cunning and guile, and openly admitting to having used it for evil in the past. Ultimately though it didn't matter: Whether Byakuren turned out to be truly with Gensokyo or still loyal to Shinki, Yukari had set up her dominoes to fall to her design regardless. Indeed, the monk's wiles provided at least some comfort that, either friend or foe, Reimu would not be left in peace after Yukari disappeared. “They had only good things to say about me, of course?” she asked.

“Oh, er,” Byakuren said, an awkward sideways glance answering for her.

Yukari, however, was amused. “Then all is as it should be.” She took to the sky, content that this conversation was over. “Wait one week,” she called down to Byakuren, whose hand was on her brow to shade her eyes. “You'll find a fox in Hakugyokorou. She's the one; attack her with all your strength.”

Byakuren called a farewell, but Yukari was already on the move. She flew directly skyward, still reluctant to use the power of the Gap without urgent cause; she preferred to save any energy she could- that conversation with Byakuren was going to be the easiest she would have today, and the least likely to result in violence. The Human Village already a small square in the patchwork of the world below her, she prepared to break the news of her imminent passing to the residents of Hakugyokorou.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, after entirely too long, I finally got chapter 2 finished! I kept revising it, and had to rewrite a large chunk of it entirely. I could probably keep editing it forever and never be fully happy with it though and I'm happy enough with it that I'd prefer to get it done with and move on, come back later.

Byakuren and Yukari are tied for my favourite characters in the whole series, but I promise this wasn't just a self-service chapter! (Well, maybe a little.) I see Byakuren as being every part as cunning and wily as Yukari, only lacking the sense of mischief that would make her a problem. She's got a strong sense of what she thinks is right, though, so that can be problematic in itself.

I've got a solid idea of exactly what I want to happen now, so future chapters SHOULD come a little easier. Pretty much every chapter individually was a standalone idea I had, so the difficulty was in tying them together. I'm pretty happy with Yukari's ultimate plan now, and hopefully it'll be fun to find out what she's up to.

:D

The "spellcards in Makai" explanation started as an attempt to explain why Byakuren was able to/knew how to use spellcards in her Th12 fight. I figure the spellcard rules are hard-coded into the Hakurei Barrier itself and any high level danmaku automatically gets converted down, so to speak. Since the only entrances to Makai are now found within the Barrier, Makai unintentionally became counted as part of Gensokyo by the rules and so they hold true in that world too. It's not stated in canon, but it's an explanation I feel makes a lot of sense.

Before the rules, danmaku was extremely dangerous- I compare it to a street brawl vs a boxing match, where the latter has specific criteria for victory and limitations on what you can do during the fight. Still the better fighter will win, but the fight only goes on as long as necessary to determine that. Of course, also like boxing, it might be less dangerous to fight by the rules, but getting hit still hurts!

I wanted to put a short piece between each main chapter with a past event, like at the start of this chapter, but this one turned out longer than I expected. I might separate them into chapters of their own. I'm sort of retelling established canon in them but they are relevant to the story I'm trying to tell, and besides which Yuyuko's life as a human isn't really touched on. Theirs is one of my favourite relationships in the series so I wanted a chance to explore that.

The Past

Chapter Summary

They were best friends when Yuyuko was alive, too.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Yukari? What happens when we die?”

“Your heart stops and the worms eat you.”

Yukari looked at her cherished friend; a decade or more had passed since they had first met, and Yukari couldn't help but wonder at how much she had changed. Youkai developed too, from only shadows to more corporeal forms, but the process could take centuries; many never even started. Yet, in just ten or so Springs, the creature before her was unrecognisable from the one she had found loitering in that cave- save for the same daydreamy, curious, childish gaze.

Yukari had, by chance, found a field of flowers far away from any human settlement, and had decided to move Yuyuko there a few years after they met. The village of humans that their mountain dwelling overlooked had expanded thanks to the confidence given by the local shrine, and the townsfolk had been taking too keen an interest in their little mountain home for her to be comfortable. The garden was beautiful, and plentiful with food and shelter; there were various fruit-bearing trees scattered around, and a lake playing home to a supply of fish. Yuyuko was old enough now to forage for herself, a fact Yukari was glad of; the girl had often complained of hunger even though Yukari brought her something to eat almost every day.

She never would have expected to grow so fond of a human, but Yuyuko had held some charm over her since the very first day. Yukari visited frequently, bringing her objects, sweet goods, drink, and news from the humans she observed. She had taught Yuyuko how to write, and sew, and start a fire, and gave her any tools she needed- stolen from any human who thought it safe to look away for a second: a knife to prepare food, bowls and jugs for water, twine and fabrics for clothing and building materials for shelter; the humans blamed these unexplainable disappearances on fairies, which gave her no small amount of satisfaction. Before disappearing each Winter, she made sure to leave Yuyuko with enough supplies to feed several armies- the shortage of food being blamed on angry harvest sprites- and upon Spring's return, visited her before attending to any other business. She adored their lazy evenings spent together, telling stories of the world and her adventures among the humans, and hearing Yuyuko's thoughts on the world from a human perspective.

Yuyuko didn't quite seem satisfied with the blunt, morbid answer her question had received, her lips pursed in thought. Yukari rolled her eyes. “Oh, honestly... I don't know why humans spend so much time thinking about death. It comes for them quickly enough- surely they should focus on living instead? But, fine.” The subject was of little interest to her, but still she knew plenty. “For humans at least, The Yama decides whether or not you go to Heaven. Highly strung, that one,” she said, reclining almost in idle protest at how Yama lived. “She gets tangled up interfering in others' lives trying to improve them... If she weren't immortal the stress would kill her. As for what happens to youkai, I wouldn't know. I've never died.”

Yuyuko sat up excitably. "Do you think youkai go to Heaven too?" she asked.

Yukari made a noise of disgust. "Eurgh, I hope not. Boring place, and full of entitled brats with nothing to do. Hell's far more entertaining."

"...You've been to Hell?" Yuyuko asked, keenly aware that there was some grand and terrible story behind this.

"Oh, once or twice... Not to say I was invited, but the parties they hold down there aren't fussy about the guestlist. Although... Well, *I'm* not allowed to go there, any more."

Yuyuko laughed; a clear, sweet sound. "My Yukari, too rowdy for Hell! Who could have guessed!"

Yukari silenced herself. Yuyuko had the wrong idea about Yukari's exile from the deep underground, but this idea had made her smile- and so the true story would never be told.

"So." Yuyuko sat up attentively.

"Oh, dear... That was a very decisive 'so'."

"So! You never told me what happened about that request you got."

Yukari raised an eyebrow. "I didn't tell you because I haven't *done* anything yet. I'm not going to tell you half of a story." Yuyuko persisted, however, and Yukari was always quick to give in to her demands. "Fine, fine... I paid him a visit. A curious problem- he asked for my help in subduing a particularly difficult youkai."

Yuyuko's head tilted. "Youkai? Shouldn't the shrine maidens deal with that?"

"Shrine maidens can't get near it," Yukari said with a grin; "Nor can any other human- though they certainly try. To think a cherry tree of all things could cause so much trouble."

"Oh, but the blossoms are so pretty... how could that be a problem?"

"Actually, that *is* the problem. This one is *too* pretty. Humans can't resist its pull, even from miles away, and then something about it- well, I don't know why, of course, but it kills them. It's as though they simply stop wanting to live. Youki says it feels like it's *willing* him to die- though obviously, he can't- and it seemed to get quite annoyed by the fact it couldn't hurt me, either. I can't just leave something like that free to do whatever it wants, so I think I'll-

Yuyuko's demeanour had changed dramatically, interrupting Yukari's chain of thought; Yuyuko stared forward blankly, her eyes hard and face pale, shaking slightly with an almost fearful tension in her muscles. The sudden end to Yukari's speech seemed to rouse her slightly as she mechanically turned her head to speak to her, every slow movement as though it were forced. "You'll- what will you do to it?" She asked, a poor attempt at sounding merely curious about the end of the story. Yukari narrowed her eyes, but continued. "Only a shrine maiden can destroy it, but I can at least seal it away. I'm more used to breaking into seals than creating them... but it's still just a boundary, in the end."

Her boastful smile quickly faded as she saw Yuyuko had returned to her previous catatonic state.

"Mm, seal it away, somewhere no one will ever know about it," she said serenely; "it's a shame it can't be destroyed, but at least you can stop it from ever hurting anyone else."

It was not the first time Yukari had seen Yuyuko like this. Although Yukari had taken measures to ensure her safety, Yuyuko had never seemed to come to terms with her ability; in her younger days she would often be found shaking and crying with fear, and as she got older this fear became quieter and more inward. Yukari usually struggled with reassurances, not understanding why Yuyuko would still harbour such self-loathing, or what had triggered the odd display of emotions; but this time the cause was obvious, though misguided, and she began to put her friend to rights.

"The moon and the turtle are both round," she began softly, though her eyes burned into Yuyuko watching for every tiny response to her words. "But it would be ridiculous to say they were the same thing. You'd think I was completely insane." Yuyuko only withdrew further. "What I'm saying is, you're comparing yourself to Saigyou Ayakashi based on a single common trait, so I can

only assume the same of you.”

“I’m... I’m not-”

“Boundary Of Truth And Lies, dear,” Yukari said, warmly; Yuyuko usually froze completely, so getting a response was to be encouraged. “I suppose it’s a human thing to just assume all magic is bad. But, well... How to describe it? There is a... *malice* behind Saigyou Ayakshi’s magic; I still felt I was in a dangerous situation, even though its magic couldn’t harm me at all. It’s driven by the desire to kill- It feeds off the death of humans. Well, I don’t know where *your* magic comes from, but the simple fact you ran from it, rather than embrace it, tells me enough. You’ve never once asked me to drop you in a village so you can start killing for the fun of it- if you still think you’re comparable to that monster, I don’t know what else to tell you.”

Yuyuko’s face was hard, unreadable. Yukari sighed, and repositioned herself in front of Yuyuko, on her knees. She took Yuyuko’s hands into her own, her face inches away from Yuyuko’s.

“Perhaps you can’t tell the difference, then, but I can. Take solace in the fact that if I had ever thought you were dangerous, I would have killed you. You’re only human, it wouldn’t take a second, and I wouldn’t fear a reprisal.” This was less than reassuring, but Yuyuko stirred slightly, and made eye contact for the first time. “I *haven’t* killed you, because I want you around. I could barely stand to be near that tree, but you have quite the opposite effect; I want every waking moment to be spent with you. Does that make sense to you?”

From Yukari, it was a genuine question. What made sense from a magical perspective rarely moved humans, and even in happier times communication was sometimes stilted. But Yuyuko forced a smile and nodded, her eyes shining with tears.

“...Boundary Of Truth And Lies. But at least you’re smiling again. I think what we need, then,” she said, standing up and delicately brushing herself down, “is a drink or ten, to prepare for the sealing later tonight. I’ll only be an hour, or so.” The booze run was an excuse to leave Yuyuko alone for a while; she could quite easily have reached into a Gap and plucked any quantity of bottles she liked in seconds, but claiming she wanted to pick out something special was an easy enough yarn to spin to explain her lengthy absence. She didn’t see Yuyuko’s anguished sobs as she departed.

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Yukari had originally planned to seal the tree before sunset. It was a largely docile creature, but it would most likely fight back once it realised she posed a threat, and the power of the night may have brought out previously-unseen abilities in the tree that made sealing it that much more difficult. But Yuyuko came first, and as the sky turned inky-blue she shrugged the plan from her mind. Losing to a tree was far too embarrassing to allow no matter what time of day it was.

At first glance, Yuyuko was nowhere to be seen. “My my, not in bed already are you?” Yukari called out to the garden. “I stole this from an oni, you know,” she said, waving her ill-gotten gains in the air as she spoke, “so I’m going to be in a lot of trouble soon. I’d hoped you might share at least one drop of my guilt.”

She took to the air to get a better view of the garden, scanning the darkness; Yuyuko would often go to hide somewhere after such an episode, but youkai eyesight normally made short work of finding her. Yukari froze for a second as she saw Yuyuko in the grass; lying perfectly still, something distinctly off about her.

“It’s hardly even night time, you really ought to be more nocturnal than this-” and she stopped, made speechless by what she saw as she came closer. Yuyuko was unmoving, not even with breath; the deep cut across her neck was no longer bleeding, but her clothes and hair were stained through.

Yukari's face betrayed none of her thoughts as she wordlessly knelt beside Yuyuko and cradled her, looking into her unseeing eyes. After a moment's repose, she stood, gently lifting Yuyuko's body with her; without a sound, she opened a Gap, and stepped through.

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Even in the blue of night, Saigyou Ayakashi's petals were beautiful, a rich purple rather than the pink of daylight. The evening wind gently buffeted it's branches, and toyed with loose falling petals; every facet of the tree was like a living painting. But Yukari had been unmoved by the sight the first time she saw it, and as she set Yuyuko upon the ground before it, its attempt to charm her set her fuse alight.

“You,” she hissed, an inhuman sound, her face twisted and monstrous. Words failing her, she sent a vicious blast of magic against the tree; the branch it hit snapped with a great burst of petals that got caught up in the rush. Another blast, and then twice more- now realising it was under attack, the tree made what little attempt at counter-attacking it could, focused blasts of its own magic peppering against her uselessly. She laughed coldly. “Is that why? You couldn't take my life, so you took hers instead?” She sent a great barrage of danmaku at it, the explosions splintering the bark and sending a great cloud of petals into the air; in desperation, the tree sent these at her, weaponised, but her reactions were too quick and she leapt through a gap and out of the way, taking advantage of the opening to assault the exposed bark.

With a frenzied cruelty, she blasted the tree again and again and again, incinerating every last blossom; the tree stood beaten, limbs broken and limp, stripped bare of the beauty that had been the root of its allure. And yet, it remained undefeated; she might assault it until nothing remained besides ash, but the stories would not be forgotten, and it would only grow anew. She landed by Yuyuko and looked up at the barren wreck, face hardened and determined. “I may not be able to destroy you,” she called, voice cracking with a very slight edge of triumph, “but I can make certain hers is the last life you ever take.”

She projected a magic circle beneath her, the arcane symbols channeling the magic of the night into her, and as she closed her eyes the boundaries of the world opened before her, of all things tangible and intangible. To all others, boundaries were stubborn and immovable- part of the ancient magic of creation; but to her alone, they were malleable.

Manipulating these boundaries to create a regular magic seal would be a simple command, but that was no longer her goal; the plan that had sprung to mind on the spur of the moment would require a far more delicate, cajoling touch. She felt the boundaries of the garden all around her, and pulled them loose like threads from yarn. Then, the boundaries of the tree, with a will of their own and stubborn even to her, came loose to her power, and then the boundaries of every flower, animal and spirit within the area. Finally, the cornerstone of this grand seal- Yuyuko, with whom she knit every one of these trailing threads into a new boundary, pulling it tighter and tighter until it was impenetrable.

The process was beyond anything she had ever attempted before, and as the fires of her anger cooled, exhaustion took it's toll; as the last boundary in the spell closed, she broke down to her knees and wept.

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“Youki.”

He had been present for a while, attracted by the sudden explosion of activity, but had wisely kept out of the way of Yukari's work. He walked forward now, and stood beside her, full of questions but savvy enough to bite his tongue.

She made a small attempt to stand, but the spell had almost spent her completely; her physical form was now supported only by stubbornness. "Forgive me," she said, as he offered an arm to her, taken back after it was ignored; "I've not performed such a large-scale spell before."

"It is done, then?" he asked softly. "Saigyō Ayakashi is sealed?"

"In a sense..." She was recovering quickly, a wry smirk crossing her lips as she revelled in the spectacle of what she had just done. Even by her own standards, it was quite a work of genius, especially for being conceived in the height of rage. "Or rather- yes, I have done as requested. The tree is no longer a threat to anyone, living or otherwise... and now it's time to name my price."

"These gardens are now reserved for the dead. A great barrier surrounds them that no living creature may breach. The spirits of those killed by the tree may now call this place home, and remain here at peace without fear of exorcism, until they come to terms with their deaths and are ready to move on. You have many, many new guests to attend to," she said, fixing Youki with a significant look; "The Konpaku clan should keep these gardens beautiful so they feel comfortable here, no?"

Youki opened his mouth in surprise, but he knew he had little room to argue; he nodded dutifully. "...We would have continued to do so regardless, and it's certainly for a noble cause. Very well- we will ensure no more beautiful garden exists in all the world."

"Were Saigyō Ayakashi ever to bloom again," she continued, making no acknowledgement of Youki's pledge, "all it would find is a world of death... but as I'm a kind-hearted sort, I have spared it that sadness. A small part of my dear friend lingers; and she will remain here, forever. I have bound her spirit to a seal on the tree, preventing its bloom. So long as the tree remains sealed, she can never move on- and so long as she remains in this world, the seal can never be broken; a clever trick, if I may say so. My wish... is that she will never reincarnate, and never again know pain..."

She took a great, steadying breath, and turned back to Youki, whose head was bowed respectfully. In both breadth and height he dwarfed her, but as she squared up to him he withdrew, just slightly, and kept his head bowed. In a low, almost dangerous voice, she commanded him, "you will treat her as you would treat a princess," and walked away without another word.

Although Yuyuko's spirit remained enough that it might be bound to the seal, it was barely even a trace; few spirits had the willpower or desire to remain in the living world long, and those that did would more often become vengeful and malevolent than take any corporeal form. But as she wandered the gardens in solitude, now free of Saigyō Ayakashi's oppressive magic, the tiniest fragment of hope survived all her attempts to quash it with reason. The spell had at least ensured that her spirit would always remain; if it could just remember even the tiniest shred of who it once was, then maybe- possibly-

Over the weeks and months that followed, Yukari visited Hakugyokorou every day, making a plausible excuse out of checking the integrity of both seals. Every day, she asked Youki how the resident spirits were responding- "just out of curiosity". Now avenged, many of the agitated spirits had calmed down and become peaceful, though others remained confused. It stung her to realise that, had she only thought to create this world sooner, Yuyuko's loneliness might be solved; her manipulation of death precluded her from living company, but could have been used to pacify the already-dead.

Even among the peaceful spirits, none had taken a form more advanced than misty orbs of will, similar to youkai shades, and she was no longer able to convince herself anything more might

come of her spell. She planned to spend a long time sleeping in solitude to let her thoughts settle, but as she was opening the Gap to nowhere-in-particular, a clear voice shook her from her reverie. “Oh, hello.”

Shining with the same ethereal quality of the moon, the ghostly form of Yuyuko drifted towards her. Yukari's chest tightened, but the wistful and carefree way Yuyuko looked about, apparently wholly oblivious to the gravity of the reunion, was disarming; all she managed in response was her name: “Yuyuko.”

“Oh, that's me, isn't it?” A mildly ponderous look came over her, agonisingly carefree; there were a hundred things Yukari wanted to say, all at once, and a thousand she wanted to hear. “Well, if you know me,” she continued, “then I suppose I must know you as well... Oh, the moon is pretty tonight,” she said, the entirely out-of-place observation cracking Yukari's shell and getting a choked laugh in response.

Yukari had no idea if memory loss was normal for ghosts, or how much Yuyuko might remember- if anything- about her life, or how much of the original person remained when a ghost was formed; a lot of learning was ahead of both of them, much to explain, many questions to ask Youki, and more boundaries to watch over than ever before... but for the moment, all of that could wait. She held a hand out to Yuyuko. “Walk with me,” she asked softly.

“I think I'm floating, though,” she responded airily, but took Yukari's hand anyway.

Yukari didn't take her eyes off her beloved friend, as though afraid the wind might spirit her away in a sudden gust. “Do you remember me?” she asked; “my name is Yukari,” she added as an additional prompt, just in case.

Yuyuko's face shifted in thought, as though wondering herself if the name might recall anything. Eventually, rather than commit herself to an answer, she smiled sweetly. “Hello, Yukari. I'm pleased to meet you.”

Chapter End Notes

I originally planned to have each chapter start with a short piece showing the history between Yukari and Yuyuko, but this one just ballooned out of control so it became a chapter of its own. I really enjoy the relationship they share and the first half of this is one of my favourite things I've ever written- their interactions just seem to come easily to me, somehow.

This is, I suppose, an attempt at an origin story for Hakugyokorou, since canon details are sparse. It was also a convenient way to explain why the Konpaku family are quite so... resilient in the face of Yuyuko's leadership. He made a deal with the devil, and her price wasn't so unfair.

Like the rest of this story, it was conceived as a stand-alone one-shot at first, but I have made sure that the events in these Past chapters are relevant and important to the overall story.

The “pleased to meet you” is a reference to [this video](#), as well as a call-back to Yukari's use of the phrase last chapter. I saw that video early on in my development as a Yukari fanboy and it was pretty instrumental in my love for their relationship, so I wanted to pay it a little homage.

The “My wish... is that she will never reincarnate, and never again know pain...” line is firmly established in canon- it's the text Yuyuko finds in an ancient record speaking of a girl buried beneath the cheery tree, and thus starting Perfect Cherry Blossom's plot moving. It was pretty tricky to slot it in in a natural way- I figure Youki documented this whole event and that was one of the parts that survived the ages.

Hakugyokorou

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Yukari's shoulders sagged as she looked up at the challenge before her; she had not used this entrance to Hakugyokorou in centuries, usually preferring to Gap straight to the gardens at the top, and the near-endless steps that led to them exhausted her just by sight. At the very least she wouldn't have to walk it, but even aided by flight, the journey took an unreasonable amount of time; on that one fateful day she had intercepted the shrine maiden's ascent, their entire battle had been and gone before the top was even in sight. Still, Reimu had completed the journey no less than three times during that incident, without complaint- and Yukari would not be outdone by a human.

An hour passed, and the gardens at the summit were still out of sight. She flew on her back, almost reclining, in near-total stasis; youkai flight required no focus, and the gardens- though beautiful- could only hold her interest for so long before losing their lustre. An urgent voiced recalled her senses, having apparently been trying to do so for some time.

“Hey! I *said*, what are you doing here?” Yuyuko's servant called- a half-ghost who had taken over Youki's duties since the formation of the Netherworld; Yukari never much cared to remember her name. She was running the stairs instead of flying, but her nimble feet managed to keep pace.

“Mm, these gardens are beautiful... such a shame about the insects that buzz in your ear.”

“Don't under-estimate me!” Youmu answered, a savage grin darkening her face. “It's obvious you're up to no good- you can just appear at the top any time you want!”

“The quiet ones are happy to keep to themselves, but the noisy ones... if they don't buzz off, you have to swat them,” Yukari said placidly.

Youmu grabbed the hilt of her sword. “Fine. You'll answer me after I knock you out of the sky.”

“Back beneath the flowers, dead girl.”

Reimu's patience, always in short supply, was now more than exhausted. What should have been a lazy day watching petals in the breeze had instead been spent investigating the endless winter that denied her this pleasure. The search had ultimately brought her here, this supposed land of the dead, to find that the culprit- a ghost motivated by little more than morbid curiosity- had siphoned the power of Spring from Gensokyo with the aim of bringing bloom to the miserable tree behind her. This tree was massive, but utterly lifeless, and despite its size it struggled to stand out among the brilliance of it's brethren, each bolstered by an entire worlds' worth of Spring.

It was rare for a ghost to possess strength enough to take such a definite form as this one, but Reimu had dealt with ghosts before; her opponent's final spellcard broke, the end of a hard-fought battle, and the ghost was knocked back by the force.

As a ghost, she was weightless, and so instead of falling to the ground with a satisfying thump she only drifted away, hanging limp in the air like a ragdoll caught on a branch. Reimu would have to chase her down eventually to give her a thoroughly deserved telling-off, but that had to wait. She now focused on a more pressing matter: how to retrieve Gensokyo's Spring?

There was no doubt that the entire garden was thriving under the power of more than its fair share

of Spring, but the ghost had implied she was channeling most of her ill-gotten gains into this gnarly old tree. Inspecting the tree closer, she felt a definite, if faint, trace of an ancient seal in place around it. This seal was without a doubt the reason the tree couldn't bloom, but as she probed further to try and glean why exactly it had been sealed in the first place she felt the magic weakening at an alarming rate. Her temper flared up- ancient seals were usually in place for a very good reason, and attempting to brute-force one open just to see some blossoms was incredibly foolish.

“Hey!” The ghost had drifted back into view. “You'd better help me draw all the Spring out of this- the seal's about to break!”

Her opponent, however, showed no sign of complying- or indeed, any sign she had heard Reimu at all. She hung in the air, as though suspended by a string, and floated- or, as Reimu realised too late, was pulled- towards the tree.

Reimu was struck by a sudden and powerful sense of foreboding, an intense feeling of present and imminent danger; and then, just as quickly, this sense of disquiet vanished, and all felt calm, peaceful... *safe*.

A voice of alarm rang in her mind that this wave of tranquility was unneutral, but was quickly silenced as she watched the ghost's serene journey through the air come to an end in the tree's spidery branches.

From trunk to tip, tiny buds appeared all along it's limbs, and grew rapidly into blossoms. The seal was breached at last, and the full force of the season rushed into the tree all at once. As it erupted into a full bloom, an astonishing splash of colour and vigour, Reimu understood why the ghost had been driven to such measures; the word 'beautiful' was too weak, too overused- sullied by it's use for inferior things- to be used now. The only word that sufficed, the only word Reimu could bring herself to utter, was “wow”.

The vibrant petals shimmered in the sunlight as the breeze made them dance, and even the surrounding splendour faded from her thoughts completely- utterly dull in comparison; a blemish in the background ruining something more perfect than perfect.

She closed her eyes; she didn't want anything to spoil this one perfect memory. Looking away would only invite the misery that nothing else in the world would ever be so beautiful. No, she thought; nothing better would ever come. Contented and peaceful, she sank to her knees. If only she could die right now, she thought, she would be able to do so with no regrets; this was inarguably the pinnacle of her life, and in death she could stay with the tree forever. Yes... if she died here, this perfect memory would never leave her. All she had to do was let go.

She slumped sideways, but her senses were already leaving her and she felt nothing. The sounds of the world grew faint, distant, part of a world she no longer inhabited. Her body became an anchor, a horrible trap preventing her from her perfect death... but she would soon be free of it's confines. The world became nothing as she sank... deeper... deeper-

A sudden change of pressure roused her; her senses snapped back into place all at once, bringing with them the uncomfortable sting from the scuffs on her knees and a dull throb where her face had hit the ground. The sunshine dazzled her, all sights blurred by eyes unwilling to focus.

Her head swam as she felt out for the source of whatever magic had just taken her, but she found... nothing... not a trace of anything magical at all,. And the air, too- perfectly still, as though she were indoors, and all the ambient sounds of the world came oddly muffled as though heard through

glass. The sudden cold fear that she was now an invited guest at the ghostly banquet gripped her, and she rapped a hand against the ground. It was reassuringly painful, but-

"If you have energy enough to do *that*, then stand up. You have no business dying at a time like this."

The shock of hearing a voice so clearly against the muffled sounds of the world was enough to shake the last of the fog from Reimu's brain, and she scrambled onto her knees. Standing with her back to Reimu was a youkai she had never seen before; she was projecting some kind of barrier around them both- from what harm, Reimu couldn't tell- but more strangely, Reimu couldn't feel any magical presence at all. . "And who the heck are you, to be bossing me around like that?"

"...Later." She spoke as though her focus was entirely elsewhere. "You came here for the Spring?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. She was stealing it." She pointed at the oddly-manipulated Yuyuko. "Sure, it's pretty here, but-"

"Did you already battle her?"

"Yeah? ...Oh, hey, that's right! I already beat her! She has to give the Spring back now!"

"Clever. Very, very clever."

"Huh?" Whoever this youkai may have been talking to, or about, Reimu felt the praise wasn't meant for her.

A few awkward moments of silence passed, with no party making any move. Reimu was not known for her patience, but in this situation she felt her irritability was justified. "So... Would you mind dropping the barrier please? I need to go beat her up again."

"Ah, then I definitely can't lower the barrier. She's the only thing that can prevent the tree from killing us both, after all."

The *tree*? Reimu looked at it through the barrier; no doubt, it was a beautiful sight, even through the shimmering haze of the anti-magic barrier... but it was nothing particularly special, surrounded as it was by so much splendour. She wondered at the unnatural serenity that had washed over her, and remembered-

"There was a seal on it, but she was trying to- did it break?"

"The barrier weakened enough for Saigyou Ayakashi to bloom... but she's still here. We don't have long, though."

"Jeez... I only wanted the Spring back. Pruning youkai cherry trees isn't part of my job."

"Well, if I may? I happen to be quite fond of topiary, myself."

"Hey, I haven't even started with *you* yet," Reimu countered. "Showing up like this is pretty suspicious."

"No, absolutely. Under any other circumstance I would wholly advise against trusting me.

However, in *this* circumstance, your options are to trust me or die, and I certainly hope I'm the lesser of those two evils."

Reluctant, Reimu had to acquiesce; whatever schemes this youkai may be pulling, the truth remained that she was out of her depth; the tree had managed to pull some glamour over her that she had been powerless to stop- and only the intervention of this youkai had saved her life. This tree seemed to be a common enemy; it was the smartest course of action to work with her, and then deal with her afterwards. With a sigh, she prepared for yet another battle.

"I'm going to transfer the Spring into you," the youkai explained, frustratingly placid in the face of such a dangerous foe. "But I can't do that through this barrier. I need to lower it."

"No problem. I'll just seal it before it can charm me again. I know what's coming, now."

The youkai paused for a second, clearly conflicted about Reimu's inclusion in this plan. "You won't have time to hit it hard. Use the quickest seal you know," she instructed; the words came slowly, each carefully considered. "I can always put another barrier up if it takes you again, so

fight fearlessly. But more importantly- more than anything- *don't* seal the girl, under any circumstance. Everything hinges on that.”

“Hey, she attacked me, I'm not gonna just-”

“You need to tell me you understand, and quickly. Unless you'd prefer to discuss it when you're a permanent resident here?”

Reimu grumbled, but she had no real choice in the matter. “Oh whatever. I'm sick of this place.”

With a curt nod, the barrier fell, and Reimu was immediately airborne. The warmth of Spring and the clarity of sound were oddly noticeable after the barrier's dampening effect, but she shrugged this from her mind; quicker than her opponent could react, she launched an assault of magic against it- a hashed-together seal and some danmaku for good measure, which collided with the tree with enough force to knock loose some of the newborn blossoms. For a fraction of a second, Reimu saw the impressed look on her unknown partner's face, then smugly sped off, expecting a counter attack.

The pressure of the tree's magic upon her grew, and even as she fired off another volley some small part of her felt tremendous regret at damaging something beautiful beyond words; but being defeated by a youkai whose only power was “being pretty” was unthinkable, and the cacophony of soft voices willing her to die fell upon deaf ears.

Her companion, meanwhile, had projected a wide magic circle around her feet and was rooted in some deep focus. As far as Reimu could tell, the spell was having no effect- or rather, no effect beyond giving the tree an easy target; the petals scattered into the wind by her blasts were flying pointedly at the both of them, reinforced with magic and sharp like tiny knives. Reimu dove towards the ground, towards the youkai's station, and scattered the cloud of petals heading her way- before zooming back upwards and around the tree; her distraction proved successful, and the entire cloud of blossoms now targeted her.

She flew around the tree in laps, scattering any petals that got too close; but there were too many, the flurry of activity only serving to shake more blossoms loose, and she was soon overwhelmed. The sharpened edges scratched at her clothes and skin like a hundred tiny papercuts, leaving her sore and stinging all over. No longer able to bear it, she projected a quick barrier of her own and incinerated those petals closest to her, but this reprieve came at a cost; they changed target again, now intent on interrupting the spell.

The pressure of the battle eased off Reimu enough for her to realise the petals weren't being shaken loose at all- the tree was withering as the life of Spring was being drained out of it, and the brilliant flowers that had mesmerised her were the first casualty. The end of the battle in sight, she flew forward, beating the cloud of blossoms to their target. Channelling the power of the Hakurei Orb, she erected a great barrier around the oblivious youkai and herself, and the petals struck against it full-force, evaporating into smoke as they were incinerated.

As the last pink petals sacrificed themselves fruitlessly, and the tree became once more withered and grey and lifeless, Reimu felt a sudden warmth; every balmy morning Gensokyo had missed out on now filled her body, and the pressure from the tree vanished completely.

The magic circle dissipated, and after a moment of stillness the youkai spoke, audibly exhausted.

“A shrine maiden who protects youkai? No wonder you never get any donations.”

“Pft,” she said, dismissing her own barrier. “I just didn't want to owe you, that's all.”

Freed of the tree's influence, the ghost girl drifted slowly to the ground, like a person falling through space. Without a word, the youkai walked over to her and cradled her. Reimu spluttered.

“Hey, hey! Don't just walk off like that's the end of it!”

The youkai shrugged non-committally, and didn't take her eyes from the ghost girl. “You have what you came for, and you aren't dead. Isn't that enough?”

“Wh- no, it's not enough! To begin with, I don't know who the hell you are or where you got that kind of power. Start talking!”

“This world is for the dead, you know. If you stay too long, you won't be able to leave.”

“Well, *you're* still here.”

“I'm no more mortal than she is.” But then she looked up, and for the first time spoke to Reimu directly. “You have my word that I will return the favour, but this really is a bad place for it. Besides which, Gensokyo still misses it's Spring.”

Reimu was exhausted, and her original mission was complete; she was loathe to leave the situation as it was, but nonetheless the youkai was correct, and she was looking forward to a nap in the Spring sunshine. “For your own sake, you'd better.” She flew away in a bluster, grimly anticipating the excitable fairies celebrating the bounty she carried.

“...Thank you, Reimu,” Yukari spoke softly once the shrine maiden was well out of sight. She cuddled into Yuyuko, tightly, nuzzling her. “Ah, my little flower princess... how close I came to losing you again...”

--

A good hour or more had passed since Yukari's encounter with Youmu, but finally the end was in sight. No one could deny that the Netherworld steps were beautifully decorated, but the gardens of Hakugyokorou were beyond comparison; an explosion of colour, pinks and purples and reds from the countless cherry trees in full blossom, shedding their petals to the gentle wind and obscuring the paved walkways under a blanket of Spring. A small house sat in the middle of it all, charmingly quaint by itself, but it too sang with splendour as the falling blossoms rested upon its roof.

On the step leading up to this house sat Yuyuko, oblivious to Yukari's approach. Her reverie persisted for a few awkward seconds even after Yukari broke the silence with a “Hello Yuyuko”. “Oh... good evening Yukari,” she eventually answered- but her attention was still elsewhere, and the response happened on auto-pilot.

“Look at the sky, vapour-brains... It's barely past noon.”

This at last brought about a response, and Yuyuko snapped to focus. She gave the sky careful consideration, finally coming to the conclusion that Yukari was indeed correct. “But how strange... you're normally sleeping at this hour.”

“Well, speaking of sleeping- you need to have a word with your gardener.” She took a seat next to Yuyuko. “I caught her slacking off on my way up here. I came in through the Barrier, even though I can just Gap to the top; she should have stopped me for acting so suspiciously. She needs to be more alert for people who are up to no good.”

“Are *you* up to no good, Yukari?” she asked, with a small playful laugh.

“No more than usual.” Poor Youmu was certainly no longer in any fit state to be alert for anything, not after the ruthless and unreasonable assault Yukari answered her challenge with; normally she would limit herself to keep the fight both fair and fun, but there was no time for fun today. Still, Youmu was tough, and Yukari was sure she would survive... And if she *didn't* survive, at least she didn't have far to travel.

“Anyway, I'm here for an important reason.”

“Yes, it must be important if it's keeping you awake. You can normally sleep through anything.”

Yuyuko had a manner of speaking truths- that, from another, would seem tactless at best- in such a way that it was impossible to tell how rude she actually intended to be. Even after a thousand years of her company, Yukari struggled to tell if there was any genuine malice in most of what Yuyuko said.

"I've found something that I have been trying to find for a very long time," Yukari continued, deciding not to pursue Yuyuko's intended meaning. "Or rather, *someone*."

"Oh, I see. That's nice," was the half-interested reply.

Yukari gave her dearest friend an incredulous look. "Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?"

"Yes, yes!" She beamed at Yukari, nodding vigorously as an adult might to a young child. "You were looking for someone, and now you've found them. I'm very happy for you!"

"You're a fine one to talk to me like that," she said, but she never quite could be stern with Yuyuko, instead bumping into her playfully. "It was a long time ago, so maybe you won't remember. It was when we were discussing the creation of Gensokyo that I mentioned it."

"But Yukari, you already did that. You made Gensokyo a long time ago. Do you remember?"

"...What I said to you back then," Yukari said, restrained, as she wondered if this conversation was worth having after all, "is that a place like Gensokyo is more than I could manage by myself. I would need to find someone who could be trusted to look after it in my stead... someone who would champion Gensokyo's cause. Well... I've found her."

"Ohhhhh..." Yuyuko turned her head to Yukari, her eyes wide with wonder. "You mean you've found... *the chosen one*..."

"No! Absolutely not!" Her voice was full of hurt. "This is the result of centuries of tireless work on my part, and I won't have fate take the credit for it."

Yuyuko giggled; only she could get under Yukari's skin in quite this manner. "It was my idea to start with, anyway."

So Yuyuko did remember, after all. "That's hardly a fair assessment. Your *contribution* was to idly say 'wouldn't it be nice if there was a place like Hakugyokorou but for youkai'... and you'd forgotten you'd said it less than a minute later. The actual work and preparation was wholly down to me."

"Not true! You told me 'it's unworkable', but then I suggested you let a few humans in."

"A conclusion I could have arrived at myself quickly enough... and besides which you only mentioned that because I was in Hakugyokorou despite not being a ghost. I met with shrine maidens and gods and youkai all in order to make your dream a reality, and all the while you sat up here enjoying flower-viewing parties and chasing butterflies."

"A joint effort, then. We found the chosen one together." She tilted her head back, eyes shut and a gentle smile, apparently satisfied with this conclusion.

Yukari looked searchingly at her spectral company; was she playing dumb, or had she really not caught onto the point yet? This was the constant struggle of conversation with Yuyuko, and the only way to be sure was to corner her. "That was the last step, you know," she began. "The job is complete. I've done everything I intended to do."

"Yes, we did a good job, didn't we?"

"...We did," she conceded, "but more importantly- I don't need to be here any more. My time here is done."

"Oh... Oh!" she said, snapping to attention. "That's the kind of thing humans say... it's strange, coming from you. What you mean is, you're going to die, isn't it?"

"It's not really proper to call it death when talking about youkai. But since we're talking in human terms, that's a close enough comparison. Yes," she said, averting her gaze dramatically. "I'm going to die."

Yuyuko gasped. "Oh... how wonderful!" She clapped her hands together in excitement. "I've been looking forward to this day for so long!"

Yuyuko's unique perspective on death had somewhat skewed her value of life, but Yukari couldn't

help raise an eyebrow at this regardless.

“Well,” Yuyuko continued, “That means you can spend all your time here, instead of disappearing home all the time. We can even spend winter together!”

“...How many dead youkai have come here before now?” ukari asked, realising too late her mistake; comparing her death to that experienced by humans only made sense for humans that were still alive- of course Yuyuko would get the wrong idea.

“I was about to ask! I've never seen a youkai ghost before, I wonder what they're like?”

“We're supernatural beings already. We don't have ghosts,” she explained. “And besides which, I have no intention of coming here for the rest of eternity.”

“Hmm... No, Yukari, you really haven't thought this through properly... After all, only ghosts are supposed to be here. If you don't leave a ghost behind, how will you visit me?”

“I won't. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I will no longer... *exist*, not in this form. This is my farewell to you.”

Even the trees seemed to hold still so that Yuyuko could process this in peace; a narrow frown hardened her face as she stared at Yukari, deep in consideration. Yukari let her come to terms in her own time, returning the stare but her face neutral.

Yuyuko stood delicately, and turned away. “But then... what am I to do?”

Asked so dispassionately, Yukari was unsure how to answer. “It's not like you normally do much anyway. Keep doing that.”

“I can't follow you, Yukari. I can't move on. I have to stay here. You know this.”

Yukari couldn't meet her gaze on this; she turned her chin up in feigned haughtiness instead. “You love it here. I made certain of that.”

“But I love it most when you're here to enjoy it with me.” Yukari would have preferred to see Yuyuko angry than this blankness, this thorough despondence. “You're going to leave me, and I'll be alone, here, forever,” she continued.

“Tsk. You're hardly alone. You have-”

“I won't have you. You won't be able to visit me, and I won't be able to join you where you go. That's as good as alone.”

“...I should hope you're familiar enough with my work,” Yukari said, the words coming unusually slow and thick, “to know that I would never leave so many loose ends-”

“Well! I won't keep you,” Yuyuko cut in, suddenly and falsely chipper. “You've never been one to rest on your laurels, and as you say, you have no reason to stay here any more. Take care, Yukari.”

Yukari let her drift away; most of the ghosts that had gathered to eavesdrop on their conversation floated after her, but a few stayed to watch what Yukari did next. “Silly girl,” she said with a sigh. “Humans value their farewells, and that wasn't a very good one. I hope she doesn't regret it later. ...Since you're all listening in on me anyway,” she said, addressing the ghosts- some drifted away as nonchalantly as spectral orbs could, but most showed no shame- “you may tell her that if she feels she has made any mistakes, I will forgive them so long as she treats the guest I invited here with the highest respect.”

She turned away, and the ghosts lost all interest in her, returning to their lazy drifting. But she did not walk back towards the endless stairs; she passed between the trees bordering the grounds and instead walked deeper into the gardens. The opportunity to speak with her had been welcome, but Yukari had not come to Hakugyokorou to see Yuyuko.

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Hidden away behind the house, invisible amongst the splendour of the flowers celebrating the coming of Spring, Saigyou Ayakashi remained imprisoned in endless winter. Few who came here

ever noticed it, despite its size; even Yuyuko had taken centuries to notice its forlorn and wretched appearance. A ring of cherry trees stood guard around it, stealing away any attention it might otherwise receive.

Wards, spells, and barriers surrounded it, but Yukari shrugged these off as she emerged from the thick blossoms into the empty ring. With an air of calm, she raised her hand and fired a shot- only one; she liked to build up to the cruelty of the barrage- at the tree. It exploded in the canopy and the branches swayed, groaning with age, but it was undamaged.

“Good afternoon,” she called with a savage smile as the branches settled. “It's me again. Did you miss me?”

It couldn't speak, but the swell of its hate was answer enough. “It's been quite a while since that incident with the shrine maiden, hasn't it? I'm sorry for leaving it so long; I've had a lot of work to do since that day.”

The tree's roots, unchanged from the days of its sudden and expansive unnatural growth, protruded from the ground at the base of the trunk, thick legs snaking away and burrowing deep out of sight. She perched on one of these, the tree unable to protest such a dominant act, and reclined against the thick trunk with casual disdain. “I admit, that was clever of you,” she said in regards to that day; “I'm surprised you were able to notice that little loophole I put in your seal.” She smiled; it wasn't a developed enough youkai to have emotions, exactly, but the tree certainly knew when it was being provoked. The spikes of malevolent magic directed at her, rendered impotent by her seals, pleased her to no end. “Settle down, dear. I don't want to leave you with the false impression that you outsmarted me- that loophole you exploited was quite deliberate. A means to unseal herself, should I ever be unable to do it for her. I thought of everything.”

Even the small victories were fun, and the chance to rub salt into its wounds after foiling its plans so near to success was too sweet to refuse; but she didn't have time to sit and savour it. “Well, I can't sit and chat forever. There's work to do.”

She alighted from the giant root, her dominance once again reasserted, and strode a few feet away, turning on her heel to face the tree again in its full image. “Oh my, Reimu did a good job of this seal, didn't she?” She hadn't expected it to be quite so powerful, created in the heat of the moment, but it was moot anyway; she would dispell it once she had finished her business. It would, however, provide valuable insurance against any mishaps while she worked. “Naturally, it pales in comparison to my own seal. I was in a rather indelicate mood that day, so I really put my all into it.” The seal she had made was all but impenetrable, save by its creator; but that was the problem, quite unintended, and although it had been necessary at the time, it was now critical that she reopen some loopholes.

Weakening a seal was a far trickier process than outright breaking it, not least because of the delicacy of her work; Reimu's seal would not hold for long if her own became too weak, and allowing Saigyou Ayakashi even a second of respite was unthinkable with Yukari so vulnerable while she worked. And if it were to gain control over Yuyuko again...

She quickened her pace, changing and manipulating the countless magical boundaries that defined her spell to her satisfaction, until- finally- the seal was perfect. With a wave, she broke Reimu's seal like a cobweb; she wanted no sign of any human interference.

“And so, finally,” she said, her voice heavy, “my revenge is complete. I hope Reimu's interference didn't spoil the surprise too much, but that can't be helped. Did you notice? While you were unsealed, did you get a chance to realise where you are? Or was the shrine maiden too distracting?” She grinned savagely. “I had always intended for this seal to break eventually. Once Yuyuko and I

are no longer part of this world, you will be free to bloom as much as you wish. Here in this land of death, not a single living eye will ever see you.”

“But, of course, the shrine maiden makes me look quite the fool, doesn't she?” She shrugged. “It's not much of a land of death if someone so vibrantly and incessantly alive as Reimu can come here any time she wants. The stupidity of humans is something I've come to expect, and yet they still find ways to surprise me. Why, just earlier today I met a *most* surprising human...” She cackled with laughter, no longer able to hold it back. “Ah, human magic poses you no threat, correct? Without me around to stop you, you can happily just kill anyone who tries. Well... I really encourage you to try your best with *this* one. It's amazing what a little fear can inspire in people.”

Yukari remembered the cold and dreadful feeling of encroaching death she had felt the first time she encountered Saigyou Ayakashi, unsettling even though she had no reason to fear it... Byakuren's own encounter promised to be quite the show. “It's a shame I'll miss it,” she said, “but I kept my promise. That's enough for me.” She walked closer again, and her voice dropped to a murmur. “Every single thing I do is for her. Every- single- thing. Your fate was sealed the moment you took her from me. Enjoy your final days.”

She cackled and leapt away, propelling herself with a final barrage, ferocious enough to scatter the petals in the neighbouring trees with its impact, and fell into a Gap. She had originally planned to speak with the new gods on the mountain, but there was no longer time for that; she just had to hope that Reimu would fill them in on their role when the time came. Instead, the gap took her to the one location she was most wary of, a location she couldn't reach by any other means.

The sealed land of Makai welcomed her as the other side of the Gap closed.

Chapter End Notes

This one is really long. Another case of the 'In The Past' section being several times the length I expected it to be, plus two extra encounters. I've already committed to it so I'll focus on getting the rest of this finished, but if I were to start over (nooooooooooooo) I'd definitely spend more time figuring out where to split chapters.

Well, Yukari's plan is starting to come together, but tricking Byakuren into meeting Saigyou Ayakashi isn't the end of it.

I've said before that I really enjoy writing Yuyuko and Yukari together, and the conversation they have here was a lot of fun to do. Yuyuko doesn't really get upset or angry, she just gets very despondent and quiet, so it was a bit of a challenge to write that part... many rewrites were necessary.

Poor Youmu... she seems to be the kind of kid who says things that she thinks sound really cool, but actually just come across as kind of lame. Just look at her interactions with Reisen in IN. Well, I don't want to be too mean to Youmu, she gets enough punching-bag treatment from Yuyuko.

Speaking of whom, she's super smart you know. She might seem slow, but she's just suuuuper laidback about most things. And pretending not to understand something you understand perfectly well is a great way to rattle someone's cage.

Ah, but I think she gets pretty lonely. Based on various game endings that I won't spoil, she seems to be less satisfied with her, uh, death than she maybe lets on. Yukari is the only constant she's had since she became a ghost, and losing her would be pretty hard for her to take.

Makai

Chapter Summary

Yukari heads to Makai, intent on stirring up as much trouble as she can before her time ends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Yukari emerged from the gap, a look of disgust immediately upon her face as she gathered her bearings- the plane of Makai was infinite in breadth; placing a gap "somewhere in Makai" was an indefinite proposition at best. Vast crystalline structures cast gloomy shadows in the perpetual red sunset, but visible far in the distance was the only landmark of note- Pandemonium, its impossibly tall crystal towers a foreboding sight for all the land to see. Flying that distance would take longer than she would have liked, not least because her mission demanded she return to Gensokyo before the rapidly approaching midnight; Makai's toxic air might not harm her the same way it would a human, but it was more than just poisonous- a grim malaise hung within, an ever-present sense of danger, felt equally by humans and youkai alike.

Makai's residents were a famously violent and unwelcoming bunch, there to either prove their mettle or because they thrived in the bleak atmosphere. She had no fears for her safety, but she could ill-afford to spend the time dealing with such pests. Battles in Makai were not the fun and games they were in Gensokyo, and attackers would not be dissuaded by being shot down just once.

Her meetings with the goddess Shinki had rarely passed without some violence, and she was confident today would be no exception. She reluctantly accepted that it would be better to turn tail and injure her pride than exhaust herself or run out of time in a lengthy confrontation, however much fun she might have goading Shinki.

She was distinctly unwelcome in Makai, her previous clashes with Shinki's ideals earning her a resolute ban from entering the realm- not that this had ever stopped her. She made no effort to conceal her presence this time, hoping her magical signature was recognisable enough to trigger urgent response from the Goddess. She wondered, vaguely, if the events of Reimu's visit were known to her, or if learning of Byakuren's release would be a surprise. Yukari intended to be as annoying as possible, something she was very good at; a lot of consideration went into how to most effectively pinch those nerves... and Shinki's prior knowledge of these events would make wonderful nerves to pinch.

A dark cloud grew from the impossible crystal tower, swirling about it like a flock of bats; she had indeed been spotted, and the advance guard was on its way. "I have no interest in fighting," she called forward as the cloud approached; "I'm only here to talk with Shinki."

"From you, violence would be preferable," the cloud thundered as it coalesced; and Yukari struggled to contain her surprise as the Goddess herself emerged from it. Her blood-red robes billowed in an unnatural wind as she fanned her six wings out in proud display, each pair settling majestically into place with a fanfare of sparks. Flashes of lightning in the distance completed the display as a small band of fairy guards took formation around her.

Yukari gave a little clap. "Ahh, bravo, you've been working on your entrances!"

Shinki sniffed, already out of patience. "To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?"

"Now, now, let's not tell lies where the fairies can hear us- this isn't pleasant for either of us. ...Oh, apologies, it's not 'fairies' here, is it?" she said, as two more formations took position to flank her escape. "I always forget; you prefer 'demons'."

"Not even you would kick this hornet's nest just to mock us. You are here for a reason." Shinki's demeanour was cool, despite the dramatics of her arrival and the outrage of Yukari's transgressions. She took it as a challenge.

"Quite right. I'm here to see if we can patch up our differences before I die. It'll be much harder to do it after that, you see."

Shinki gave Yukari a searching look, as though expecting her to continue talking. "...Heh," she sniffed, as no further explanation came. "Gensokyo's champion is going to simply abandon it? I don't know what you're trying to pull, but you can't possibly think I'm gullible enough to believe a lie that weak."

"No... No, that's not what I said at all. Really, every single thing you just said is wrong. Gensokyo's champion isn't going anywhere- I am. And I most certainly do think you're that gullible."

Shinki rolled her eyes. "Your little shrine maiden can't protect Gensokyo forever."

"Hm?" She tilted her head innocently. "Oh, you mean the little shrine maiden who wandered into your lands entirely by accident and brought your invasion to its knees in humiliating defeat? No, I'm not talking about her, either. Although while we're on the subject, 'youkai travel agency'? You couldn't possibly have thought we were gullible enough to believe a lie that weak."

Shinki's nonchalant demeanour wavered for a fraction of a second as she scowled; challenge complete. "Between every resident of Gensokyo, only one saw through it enough to act upon it," was her somewhat weak defence.

"Well, much as I'd like to discuss your failure to deceive a little girl, she's not who I meant. We have a secret weapon!"

Shinki shrugged, derisive. "I have a hundred secret weapons to counter every one of yours. You'll need to do better than that."

"Oh, dear... I think you should count them again- it's ninety-nine, now. I'm afraid you're down one monk."

Shinki's eyes widened, and her cool demeanour dropped; replaced with the dangerous glare of a cobra coiled to strike. "I'm impressed," she admitted. "Even among youkai, she's little more than legend."

"The temple she built in the Human Village is very convincing. It would really take a lot of effort to doubt her existence now. Oh... didn't you know?" she said, as Shinki's lips narrowed even further; "Reimu popped in a week or so ago with some friends and freed her... how strange that you didn't detect Reimu's interference. Those enchantments I performed to make her invisible to you must work better than I expected. Apologies- that's two secret weapons, then."

She swerved in the air to dodge a shot. The fairies remained motionless, obedient to the very whims of their mistress. "Oho, that temper of yours... A battle then, is it?" Yukari asked. "Well, you're the hostess. You decide how many spellcards we'll play."

Shinki laughed, a disappointment; Yukari had expected this dig to rankle her even further. "Hah! Spellcards, did you really think that silly little trick would work here? This domain follows only my rules!"

"I didn't think it would at all! Byakuren only told me about it today. It was quite a surprise to find out." And then, to further implicate Byakuren as some kind of mole- entirely unfair, but no word Yukari said could quite be called a lie- added, "she doesn't stop once you get her started, that monk. Secret after secret pours forth. I really learned a lot today- Spellcards were only the start." Shinki's voice lowered to a malicious whisper. "Let me show you, first-hand, Makai's contempt for

your *rules*.”

Wordlessly, with only a gesture of her hands, Shinki declared a spellcard; from all around, erupting from the ground and falling out of the clouds, fairies swarmed to surround the two youkai; every fairy that joined the formation seemed to bring another two with her, and those two more, blacking out the sky until the glow of Shinki's wings was the only light visible. Every one of them glared at Yukari, spears and swords and knives all ready for the attack. “Contempt indeed,” she said, as she tried to match each glare with her own. “This is entirely too many familiars for a spellcard.” “Oh? The number of familiars *I* have fits comfortably within the *rules*.” Every ounce of derision she had went into this last word, a degree of smug satisfaction even Yukari struggled to stomach. “Letting your familiars have familiars of their own? What kind of low-life would do such a thing?” “I know every trick,” Shinki hissed. “Every trick, every work-around, and every loophole. The spellcard rules are as good as *meaningless* to me. So let your little shrine maiden come! Let her fight us on her terms! We won't be bound by the rules she's playing with!”

An all-encompassing stillness seemed to engulf the entirety of Makai as both parties realised what she had just said.

“How funny you should say so,” Yukari said. “Because, of course... I'm not *bound* by the rules, either.”

A dozen Gaps sprung open all around her, and from each an impossible amount of danmaku spewed forth. Indiscriminate in direction and meteoric in speed, the sudden light was as dazzling as the sun; fairies all around exploded in colourful smoke before they could even react. Shinki wheeled away, startled, as fairies zipped forwards to intercept any danmaku heading her way. Spying her opportunity amidst the chaos, Shinki unfurled her wings and prepared to retaliate, only to find her attack suddenly fizzle out.

“All spellcards have a set time limit,” sang Yukari's head, popping out of a Gap by Shinki's ear. “The boundary between spellcards is so clearly defined, modifying it is effortless.” She yawned for emphasis.

Shinki spun around, seething with anger. She sprayed a quick burst of low-level danmaku, but Yukari's head had already ducked back into the Gap. A sudden impact against her wing knocked her forwards- just a single bullet, fired from behind. Yukari floated lazily into view, an outstretched finger pointing at Shinki. “Pow!” she said, another single bullet flying forward. Shinki swerved, but three or four more 'pow's came immediately after, two hitting their mark. Her wings crackled with magic as she readied another attack, and from each wing-joint blasted a thick beam of energy. The propulsion of the beams launched her to safety- using the distance to her advantage, she swept the beams back and forth across Yukari's position, attempting to trap her between them.

“How disappointing, playing your ace so soon,” called Yukari, recognising the attack as a spellcard version of Shinki's signature dish. “If this is as exciting as it's going to get, I might as well end it now.”

A bright white light appeared over Shinki's head. From it, thin golden vines of light sprouted, twisting around her in a large dome until she was surrounded. They then regrouped beneath her, and she was trapped- a canary in a giant shimmering birdcage. She looked around wildly, but the spell was not yet complete; from the bars of the cage shot thick cords of light, their movements heavy and indelicate like chains, that entwined around the base of her wings and pulled them painfully tight together, restricting her movement; another pair then appeared from the front and did the same to her wrists, forcing her hands together before settling into the form of thick golden manacles. Yukari hummed with satisfaction at her prize. “Well, how do you like my new spellcard?” She asked. “I'd appreciate some help with naming it. I toyed with 'Boundary Between The Best And The Worst', but we'd only argue over which one of us was which. How about

'Boundary Between Two Idiots'?"

"...Come closer," Shinki glowered, her voice dark and low.

"I feel like that would be an exceptionally stupid thing to do under the current circumstances."

"...Your *second* mistake!"

Shinki threw her head back, cackling; Yukari watched, amused, as with a herculean effort Shinki wrestled with her chains, her six wings straining to overcome them. The grounds of Makai below them went haywire as she struggled, twisted crystal formations sprouting chaotically from unnatural fissures, their keen cruel points rising to their height and beyond. With a roar, the chains burst open and the cage shattered, a spray of danmaku following for good measure as Shinki rose like the phoenix from the diminishing light.

Yukari swerved around to avoid the incoming shots, but Shinki had her sighted; with a cruel look of triumph, she brought her own order to the attack.

"U-ugh..."

Yukari wheezed with the sudden impact, and with grim incredulity examined the shard of black crystal that had impaled her. Where the rest of the column had grown erratically, this one shard had been on-target, piercing straight through her.

She hissed as Shinki flew closer, full of scorn. "Do you see?" she asked. "Do you *see*? Everything-everything!- in this realm, only obeys *my* rules!"

"Y-you..." she winced with the effort of talking. "You... are s-so... cute!"

With a snap, she flicked Shinki on the forehead and swerved to the side, revealing the two open Gaps that the shard had entered and exited from, both open immediately close to her person. "Now where were we?"

Exactly the same as before, an orb of golden light appeared over the bewildered Shinki, and grew into an elegant birdcage; despite her attempts to evade them this time, the chains once again coiled around her wings and snapped tight. Tiring a little of the show, Yukari hurried the spell along, and the golden manacles simply reappeared with a cheerful pop.

"You should just let me have my way," Yukari taunted her prisoner. "We can do this as many times as you like, but I know you can only use a counter-spell twice more, and I'm never going to get bored of seeing you bound up like that."

"...Say your piece."

Yukari took a deep breath, and cleared her throat. "Very well... I hope you're paying attention. Ahem... 'Your plan won't work'. ...Hm, that didn't take as long as I'd expected. I almost wonder if all this elaborate set up was worth it."

Shinki would not rise to this bait; she stayed dangerously silent, and Yukari was forced to continue talking unprompted.

"I really was telling the truth earlier. I've caused all the trouble I've meant to, and more besides; my time to go is rapidly approaching."

"And we will overrun Gensokyo the moment it comes."

"...Therefore," she continued, amused by Shinki's blunt stoicism, "I've come to tell you, one last time... that Gensokyo is paradise."

"Gensokyo is prison!" Shinki spat. "And once we've torn down your ridiculous Barrier, the humans will regret backing us into it. The world belongs to youkai! We will take it back!"

Yukari gave her an almost-pitying look. "Do you know," she said softly, "that in the Outside World, magic is no longer just for the shrine maidens? I've seen it myself... every single human walks around with a little box of light in their pocket, now. At a touch, it lights up as bright as the

moon, instantly. And more amazing than that, speaking into one box makes their voice carry to another- even if it's a hundred miles away. They line their streets with lanterns that even the coldest rains can't extinguish. They've learnt to fly, using giant steel birds that don't need to flap their wings; and there is a city in a far-off land called Big Apple where the people never even go to sleep. So tell me, what youkai can live in a world like that? What human could ever know fear in a world where they have even conquered the night?"

"We will teach them what fear means."

"Oh, please. You think humans still fear the name 'demon'? Even children laugh at monsters instead of fearing them. The old gods have had to abandon their ancient homes due to a lack of faith. The Outside World has forgotten us- only Gensokyo remains a safe haven for our kind."

"A world under the control of the shrine maiden can never be a safe haven for youkai!"

"A shrine maiden who even let your despicable monk build a temple, despite her entire ethos running counter to everything the shrine maiden supposedly stands for. A world for both youkai *and* humans is, no less, a world for youkai."

"You're wasting your time..."

"Not at all!" She laughed. "I didn't come here to *convince* you of anything, that's a fool's errand. It's just, by the time your failure comes to pass, I won't be around to say 'I told you so', so I wanted to get it in ahead of time. But don't worry," she added as Shinki quivered with rage, "there is a bright side to this. When Reimu sends you crying back home, you can think back to this moment as only the *second* most humiliating thing that has ever happened to you. I'll take second-place to a human- won't that make you feel better?"

"I will burn every last flower and blade of grass in Gensokyo," Shinki seethed, her voice shaking.

"The shrine maiden, the Human Village, the *temple*-" Yukari smirked- "I will destroy every single thing you have ever loved."

"But I love *you*, Shinki. Why don't you start there?"

With a roar, and a barrage of danmaku, Shinki smashed the golden cage with a counterspell once more, but the Gap had already closed behind Yukari. The moon shone, but the stars had not yet appeared in Gensokyo's inky blue evening sky- a briefly disorienting contrast to the endless blood red of Makai. Proud of her work, she flew to the shrine- the last stop on her tour of mischief.

Chapter End Notes

You might be the world's best chess player- you might have memorised all the rules, know all the feints, be able to predict 50 turns in advance and set up elaborate traps and counters. But however deep your knowledge and mastery of the rules is, it still doesn't matter if your opponent can, at any time, remove your pieces from the board at random, or decide your pieces are now theirs, or flip the table, punch you in the face, and call themselves the winner.

That's the kind of frustration I wanted to show here. Shinki would have bent the rules into her shape within moments of their sudden arrival, but for all she can bend and twist them to her liking, she still has to operate within their boundaries.

The inspiration for that came from Yukari's final Phantasm spell, Danmaku Barrier. The timer freezes if you use a bomb or have a border active, and the spell only continues once these protections have expired. That seemed like pretty flagrant cheating, and then Impossible Spellcard came out and all but confirmed she cheats

during spellcard battles, with her bullets that can't be cancelled even by another cheater. What a trickster!

Well, Shinki's a hard one. I feel like she's not quite this villainous in canon, though I imagine Yukari hates her just the same- anyone who poses a threat to Gensokyo earns that honour. I wanted her to be an antagonist, but I didn't want her to be too MUAHAHAHA EVIL AND GENERIC, so I had her as more... misguided and tricky. She has a kind of disaffected politeness in her translated dialogue, but Yukari would wear that face down pretty quickly- Shinki becomes aggressive fast in Mystic Square. Since I'd previously discussed Reimu and Byakuren working towards the same ideal but from very different points-of-view, I wanted Yukari and Shinki to be something of a parallel to that- both wanting a world for youkai but going about it a very different way in terms of humans. It's interesting to think how two people can want the same thing but still end up becoming enemies.

We're almost done! Next chapter is the last, and it's all written up- just needs edits. I hope that little death fake-out in this chapter didn't put anyone off. It all comes to an end in the next one, in more ways than one.

Hakurei Shrine

Chapter Summary

Yukari arrives, at last, at the Hakurei Shrine.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The full moon shone with fullest strength in the black sky, giving all the earth a ghostly pallour; the Shrine's small lanterns did little to contribute in comparison. Reimu was sitting at the entrance sipping tea, a shawl wrapped around her shoulders; the Spring nights were still shrugging off the bite of winter, but were not unpleasant. Reimu sighed as she cast a gaze over her handiwork for the day, spent sweeping blossoms away from the Shrine. The pile she had made was near indistinguishable from the newly settled blossoms that had landed as she worked. Beyond her notice, three fairies giggled to themselves, their mischief for the day complete, and they flew off from the trees they had been shaking all day to find their next victim.

Yukari emerged from the gap without a sound, behind Reimu; she still had time before the final part of her plan was due, and she decided it would be best spent bothering the shrine maiden.

“It's nearly midnight, Reimu. Humans should be asleep by now.”

Reimu rolled her shoulders back in a half-hearted stretch, far too jaded by these surprise visits to be startled by them any more. “It's a full moon. Midnight is when the troublesome youkai start to wake up.”

“Oh. Have you seen any yet?”

Reimu looked her way for a second, then returned her attentions to the tea. “Just one.”

“Not to worry. She won't bother you while I'm here.”

Reimu made a small noise of disgust in her throat. “Are you here for any good reason?”

“I always receive such a warm welcome when I come here... how could I stay away?”

Uninvited, she sat down next to Reimu, and looked about the messy courtyard. “...I hope your day off was refreshing.” And then, ignoring Reimu's scowl, she continued, “I've been quite busy today, myself.”

“Oh... that never ends well for me...”

“No, no! I woke up to some exciting news this morning, so I had to do some investigation. It doesn't involve you at all.”

“If it's big enough news to get you out of bed... I'm willing to bet it involves me in quite a big way.”

Yukari smiled, and let a moment pass in silence. “I hear you battled Hijiri,” she eventually said.

Reimu stopped mid-sip to glare at Yukari. “That's right...”

“It was quite a surprise, to see that name. It's one I haven't heard in centuries.”

“Mhm?”

“What did you think of her?”

Reimu shrugged. “An immortal monk sealed away in the darkest corner of Makai for a thousand years... she's about normal, by Gensokyo standards.”

“Aha... 'Normal by Gensokyo standards', which means you think she's bad news.”

“Well of course she's bad news!” Reimu said, with a little more heat than she perhaps intended.

“What kind of monk opens up a temple for youkai?”

"Youkai *and* humans," she chastised.

"Pfft," Reimu scoffed, derisive. "There weren't any humans on that boat. ...Except us, I mean."

Yukari hummed. With Reimu already so distrustful, this conversation might be shorter than she expected. "So, am I to gather," she began- deliberately and annoyingly slow- "you don't believe Hijiri is truly a friend to humans?"

"Why can't you ever talk straight? If you want me to go beat her up again, just say so."

Yukari stood dramatically, feigning hurt. "O-oh, I'm... I'm so sorry," she stammered to a wholly unimpressed Reimu. "I only- I just wanted to have one last talk with you- a friendly chat- before I- but, yes, I will get to the point, to appease your anger. After tonight, I shall vex you no more... for my time is up, and I will die before dawn..."

She threw a hand to her forehead, and began to stride away as Reimu spluttered. "Wh- Hey, wait!"

"No, please, it's too painful..."

Reimu started chasing her. "Like I'd let you leave after saying something like that! Get back here!"

"Alas, for there is no coming back from where I'm going..."

"Alright- I've been itching to use this one for a while, anyway!" She stamped her foot, and the Hakurei orbs appeared dutifully beside her. "Barrier Sign: Boundary Of Boundaries!"

Yukari stopped, agog, as a magic circle appeared beneath her feet, and her head tilted in curiosity as its edges spiralled upwards into a cylinder of faint golden light around her. This was, as Reimu's triumphant "ha!" indicated, apparently the entirety of the spell; aside from a faint magical hum, the golden light did nothing of interest. "Reimu... Reimu," she said again. "You've just tried to trap me in a barrier. That's stupid, you know? Tell me you know that's stupid."

Reimu closed the distance with a short burst of gratuitous flight, her expression smug. "Actually, I've been working on *this* spell for a while. Go ahead- try to break out of it."

With an incredulous smile, Yukari reached out a finger and touched the golden wall, recoiling as though burned as she made contact. "...Impressive," she admitted, as Reimu cackled with glee.

"You really are full of surprises, aren't you?"

"Heheh, it was your idea, in a sense," Reimu said, her false modesty convincing no one.

"Boundary Of Humans And Youkai', right? I just reverse-engineered it a little. Now then..." She straightened up, settling into Business Mode. "What's this about 'dying before dawn'?"

"...Oh. Was that confusing? I would have thought that was perfectly clear."

"Of course it's not clear!" Reimu shouted; then, remembering the situation was entirely in her control at the moment, she forced herself to cool down. "A youkai doesn't just *die*. What are you up to?"

"No, you're quite right. We exist for as long as we need to. Not like humans, who outstay their welcome. And for the moment, I'm still needed, so I'm still here. But I only have one more thing to do, and then I won't be needed, so I will take my leave."

Reimu rubbed her temples in frustration. "Aren't you the one who protects the Barrier? Gensokyo needs you more than it needs most of us, why do you think I put up with so much of your nonsense?"

"I've watched over the Barrier for long enough, and Gensokyo has become the paradise it was always meant to be. I have found a new person to be its protector."

"Huh? Wait... you don't mean- *Byakuren!*?" Reimu recoiled in horror. "No- no way! You can't seriously mean to put her in charge!"

"Obviously I'm not so stupid as to blindly trust a stranger. Didn't I tell you I've been busy today?"

Yukari smiled; she had no intention of correcting Reimu's assumption- Reimu didn't need to know her role in the plan in order to perform it. "Something big is coming to Gensokyo- soon. Hijiri will play an important part in proceedings... but I don't know if she'll be your friend or your enemy when she does. You need to get to know her better, so you can figure that out before it happens."

"I know her well enough," Reimu grumbled. "I know she's enticing all the humans away from the Shrine."

“Ah? Were there humans here before she arrived?”

“That's not helpful!”

“Oh, but I have been *very* helpful to you today. I've set things up quite nicely for you, actually.”

“The last time you set things up for me, I ended up going to Hell... and the time before that, the Moon.”

“Hm. Which was worse?”

“I couldn't say. Anything involving you just has a standard rating of 'terrible'.”

“Well, this time I'm not sending you anywhere. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

Reimu put her hands on her hips and took a deep breath. “Alright... so what *do* you want me to do?”

“When youkai cause an incident,” Yukari began, not getting to the point at all, “the Shrine Maiden fights them to restore balance.”

“Oh, is that what my job is?” Reimu said, thick with sarcasm. “I've been doing that just for fun, so that sure worked out well!”

“But, isn't that interesting? You've never restored the balance by beating up a bunch of *humans*, have you?”

“Huh? Well, humans are mostly powerless... it's hard to imagine them being able to cause much of an incident.”

“A long time ago, though, that *was* the case. Before Gensokyo, when shrine maidens were even crueller than they are today, it was the youkai who were mostly powerless.”

“Hey, you can't blame me for that. Gensokyo's the only world I've ever known.”

“Indeed... but what if someone from that time were to enter Gensokyo? What if that person were to witness a youkai causing an incident in, say... Hakugyokorou? I wonder if they would understand that in Gensokyo, 'restoring peace' means 'stop the youkai'?”

“...Woah, now hang on,” Reimu said in rebuke. “I can't just have you confess to causing trouble in Hakugyokorou and not do something about it... much less let that monk get there first and help your mischief along.”

Yukari touched her fingers to her forehead in dismay. “It's impressive how you can reiterate my point exactly and yet completely misunderstand it. If we wait for a *real* youkai incident, and she sides with the youkai instead of with you, that would be a disaster for everyone. If you let her clean up my relatively harmless mess, you can see where her intentions lie without putting Gensokyo in peril. I'll have Ran keep watch over what she does, and you may react accordingly.”

“...I'm going to Hakugyokorou.”

Yukari sighed heavily. “You're too immediate. If you show up before she does anything, she'll be on her best behaviour for the Shrine Maiden. If Ran is there, then... well, who cares what Ran thinks about anything?”

“Err...”

“Besides, while the cat's away, the mice can play. There's your chance to barge into her temple, danmaku flying, and snoop about the place.”

“Don't say it like it'd be easy. It'll still be full of youkai even if Byakuren's off somewhere.”

“Yes! A whole temple-ful of troublesome youkai for the heroic shrine maiden to round up, while *she* wastes her time dealing with my silly little mess. Humans love that sort of thing. They might actually believe you're doing your job.”

Reimu opened her mouth to argue, but then stopped and considered Yukari's point- actually quite valid, in her opinion. “Well, we couldn't have made it back if they didn't give us a ride on the ship, so Sanae did owe them a favour... but it would be a good chance to find out why exactly Kanako was so eager to help. Alright- I'll check it out, but I'm heading to Hakugyokorou straight after! You're trying a little too hard to stop me.”

“That's fine. It's not like you know when my mischief will take effect, after all.”

Reimu sneered. “You're gonna stay in that cage until you tell me.”

“What, this thing?” With an exaggerated shrug, Yukari walked forwards- through the golden

barrier without so much as a flinch. Reimu spluttered, crestfallen, as Yukari turned back to look at her would-be prison. "It's useless, of course... Tuning it to my specific signatures was a cute idea, but no barrier can contain me. Well, it wasn't *completely* useless; it kept you quiet long enough for me to say what I needed to say.

"And now," she said, looking up at the moon, full and bright, "with everything said and many, many things done, it's time for me to depart."

"...You were really serious about that, huh?"

"Of course I was. I've never lied to you."

Reimu laughed. "Even in the past ten minutes, you've lied about the barrier at least."

"I didn't *lie* to you. I *deceived* you. It's an entirely different thing."

"It's the same thing!"

"Either way, telling you nothing of actual use was the last part of my plan. This is the end."

Yukari turned, and began to walk away. Reimu called after her.

"Hey, you can't just walk away like that, you know..."

Yukari turned back, moderate curiosity on her face. "Hm? Oh, yes, of course... at times like this, humans hug each other, don't they? Well, I suppose just this once..."

"Hey, hey!" Reimu back-pedalled as Yukari approached her with her arms open. "You keep your hands off me. This is Gensokyo. In times like this-" the Hakurei orbs reappeared at her sides- "we duel each other, don't we?"

Yukari grinned. "Oh, thank goodness for that- it seemed like you were never going to ask."

Reclining on a gap, she floated skyward, and Reimu gave chase, prepared for the coming attack. "But," said Yukari, "you've already used your first spellcard, so now it's my turn." Energised by the light of the moon, now at its peak, she mouthed a spellcard declaration, inaudible to Reimu, and spending every last drop of spiritual energy she had conserved through the day, hundreds-thousands- *countless* numbers of butterflies erupted forth from her body, each composed of purple light, impossibly dense; Reimu covered her face with an arm as the cloud of butterflies approached, but they passed through her without harm. The inexorable swarm flooded outwards in every direction, skywards and underground, through the Human Village, the Forest of Magic, over Youkai Mountain, and beyond; they flew to every edge and nook and cranny of Gensokyo, to the furthest reaches of the land, and where they landed they remained, disappearing into wherever they made their home, becoming part of every rock, every tree, every gust of wind, and every boundary in Gensokyo.

Reimu peeked out from under her arm as the blinding light from the butterflies began to dim, and from the middle of the explosion Yukari had disappeared. She could see the ambient glow of the butterflies from all corners, but the world was wholly silent. She pursed her lips and, taking a moment to satisfy herself that this wasn't part of some trick, flew back down to the steps of the shrine to finish her tea.

-

"Oy! Reimu!" Marisa kicked out at the butterflies littering her path as she strode up towards the shrine. "Well, don't you reckon it's about time you did somethin' about these butterflies?"

In the prevailing days, Gensokyo had seen a sudden and alarming increase in the number of butterflies- real ones, unlike those from Yukari's stunt some weeks back, with deep purple wings and lackadaisical attitudes. The wonder of seeing such colourful displays had faded quickly, and most of Gensokyo's residents were beginning to resort to extreme measures to counter their numbers- not that these attempts had made any dent in the butterfly population.

"Eh...? Are they a problem?" Reimu answered, absentminded. The shrine itself was barely visible for the butterflies that covered every inch of it, and the grounds were in constant motion- clouds of butterflies moving from tree to tree in numbers impossible to follow.

Marisa grumbled, shaking her hat to rid it of the many butterflies that had settled on it; they flitted around her in circles for a moment before returning to the exact positions they'd held before.

“Obviously, it's a problem!”

“I dunno... Sure, it's annoying to have them around, but... at the same time, I get the feeling that everything's gonna pan out just right, you know?”

“Don'tcha think that's weird? It's worse than the Flower Incident, at least they stayed in place, n' here you are talking about it like you're dreamin'!”

Reimu stretched. “I guess. But it'd be nice if someone else could resolve these incidents for a change.”

“That's not somethin' the shrine maiden's supposed to say! That monk'll get ideas-”

Reimu immediately snapped to attention. “What about Byakuren?”

“Didn't you know? Her temple's had it worst of anywhere. All she said was 'I've been waiting for a sign like this' and off she flew... apparently they're flying from her place straight up into the sky-”

“Hakugyokorou?”

Marisa narrowed her eyes. “That's right. You two plottin' somethin'?”

Reimu shook her head impatiently. “Tell me what happened!”

“I followed her! Strangest thing, though- she passed through that weird barrier like it wasn't even there, but when I tried to follow her in it just flat out rejected me. I tried blastin' it, rammin' it, flyin' over it... nothin'! So I came to bother you about it instead.”

“Aw, jeez!” Reimu stood up suddenly, spooking some of the nearby butterflies. “C'mon, we gotta move while we still have time!”

“Wh- hey! Where're we goin'?”

Far apart from whatever Yukari wanted her to find, Reimu had been suspicious of Byakuren from the moment she arrived in Gensokyo. Reimu had not forgotten; during their battle in Makai, one of Byakuren's attacks had been uncomfortably familiar. If she could find just one hint of evidence that those two were colluding-

“I'll tell you on the way! You're good at burglary, right?”

As they sped off towards the Human Village, a ripple shook in the Great Barrier. The stage was set for Gensokyo's greatest challenge to begin, and the Barrier would oversee it through to the end.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! It's been a while... six years, in fact. In the time since the last chapter, I've moved countries, got married, and lived through a pandemic (ongoing). I've actually had this chapter written out for the longest time, but never finished editing it... it's even got the original author's notes on it, which I'll leave below as an interesting kind of time capsule.

Well, if you subscribed to this story back when I was writing it... thanks for your patience!! lol. A lot of new lore has been added since I was writing this, most pertinently the arrival of Okina and Sumireko. They kinda run a little bit counter to this story's canon, but I wrote it before they existed so please give me a pass on that.

Touhou's great, isn't it? Looking eagerly forward to the newly announced Touhou 18. Long may the series continue and thrive.

The original notes follow, from 2016:

Phew!

After two and a half years of actual writing (on and off!), and many more than that sat dreaming of this stuff in idle moments, I've actually finished the fic!

I'm sure many Yukari fans noticed she kinda disappeared after Subteranean Animism. In the time it's taken me to write this, she has since reappeared in the background of a few games, but this was originally a piece exploring where she might have gone. Now it's an AU, but that's fun too!

It's not Yukari's style to just up and vanish, so I wanted her to do something spectacular for her final moments. One last grand scheme. Becoming the Barrier is about as Yukari as it gets. It is possible for these beings to change their nature (at least, Kanako has plans to change from being a wind god to being a god of technological advancement).

I think Yukari has a special relationship with Reimu. I think it's rare for her to reveal herself to the shrine maiden, preferring to just keep an eye on things from beyond the gap. Certainly, Reimu would have inherited whatever knowledge of her there was to glean from her predecessor if they knew of Yukari's interference, but Reimu doesn't know who she is when they first meet.

But Reimu isn't an average shrine maiden, and I think when she enacted the spellcard rules it really took Yukari's eye. Here is a shrine maiden deliberately making her job harder in the interest of safety and fairness for all, allowing even the lowliest of fairies a chance to best her. That would be a pretty big deal to Yukari.

Yuyuko figured out what Yukari had done pretty quickly. She told Youmu something cryptic about going on her next adventure, and moved on soon after. Yuyuko wouldn't be able to resist her curiosity for very long, and Yukari paved the way for her so it must be something exciting. The next world, and maybe even a world beyond that one, await... Hakugyokorou would just have to deal with her absence.

It's a pretty big deal for me to have finished a lengthy project! I'm renowned for starting things and tiring of them very quickly. It took a long time, but I finished my love letter to one of the most important things in my life. Originally it was because I intended to move on like Yukari, but I think I'll be a resident of Gensokyo for the rest of my life.

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